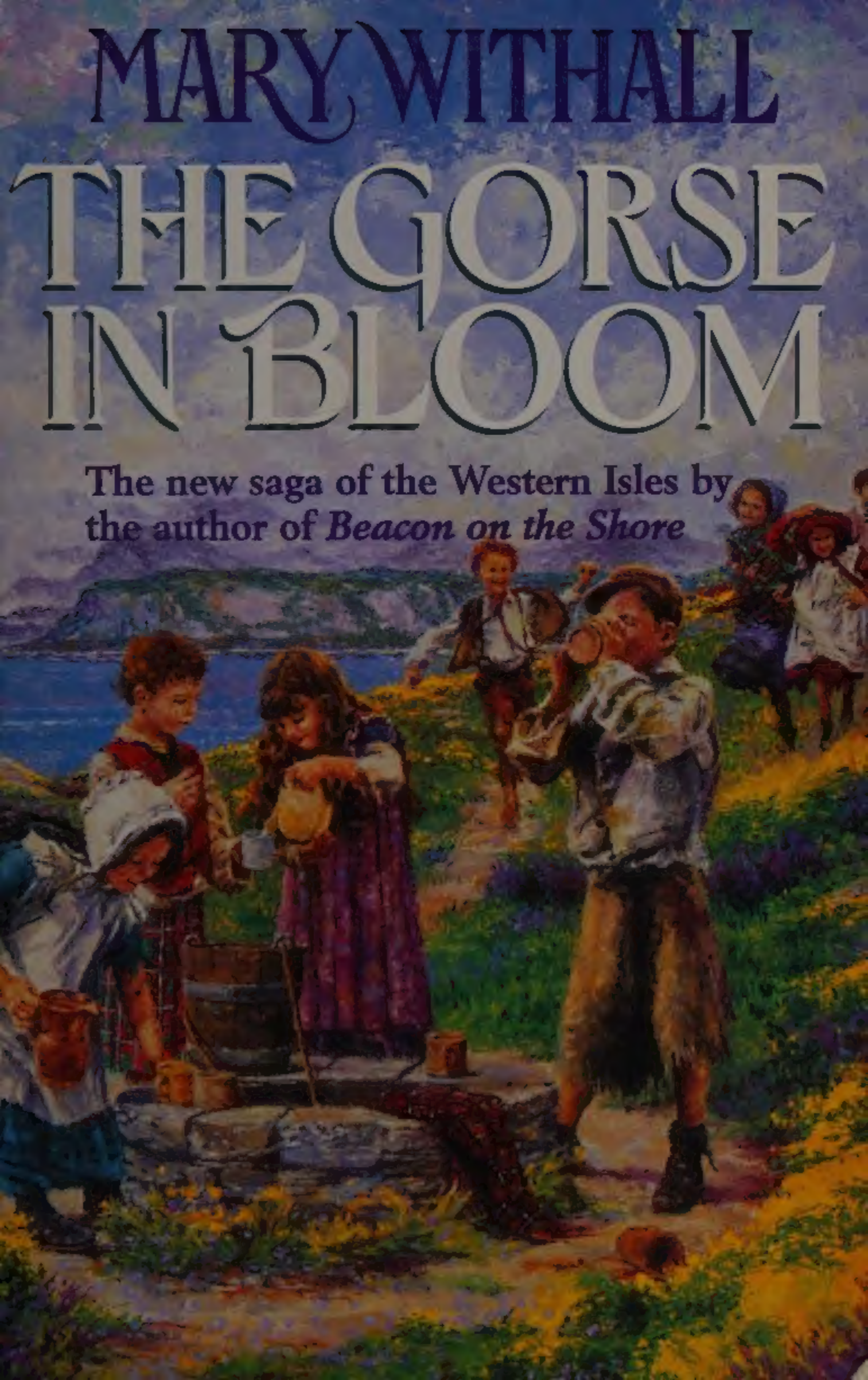
MARY WITHALL

THE GORSE IN BLOOM

The new saga of the Western Isles by the author of *Beacon on the Shore*



Kirsty had never contemplated marriage, and the proposition he was putting to her was something she could not have hoped for, even in her wildest dreams. She reached out to him, and he grasped her hands to pull her to her feet.

They embraced – at first timidly, for each was wary of the intensity of the emotion which had drawn them together. Then, more fervently, Peter crushed her in his arms, smothering her cheeks and neck with his kisses. She gasped for air and he released his grip, seeking out her hands and kissing them instead.

Also by Mary Withall

Beacon on the Shore

About the author

Mary Withall lives in Argyll and is assistant curator of the local slate quarrying museum. THE GORSE IN BLOOM is her second novel, and she is currently working on a third

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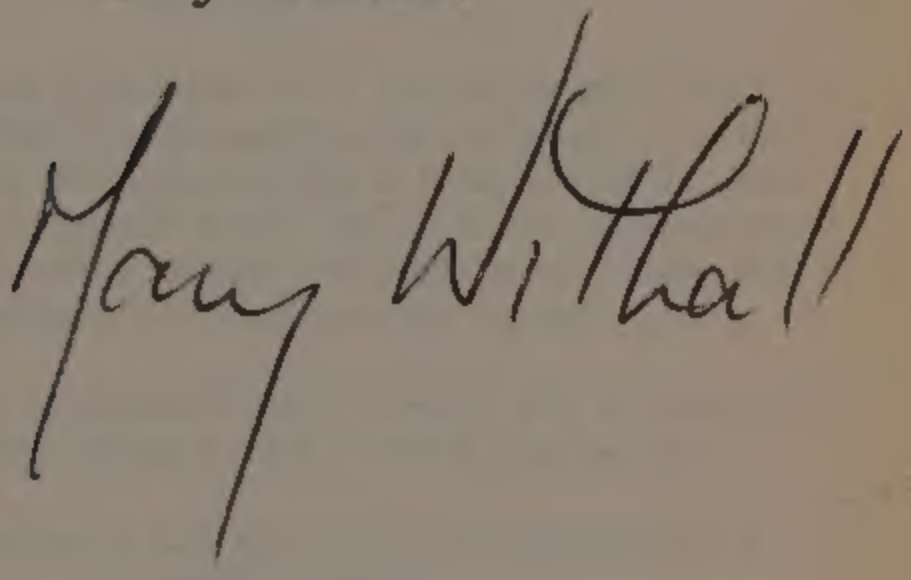

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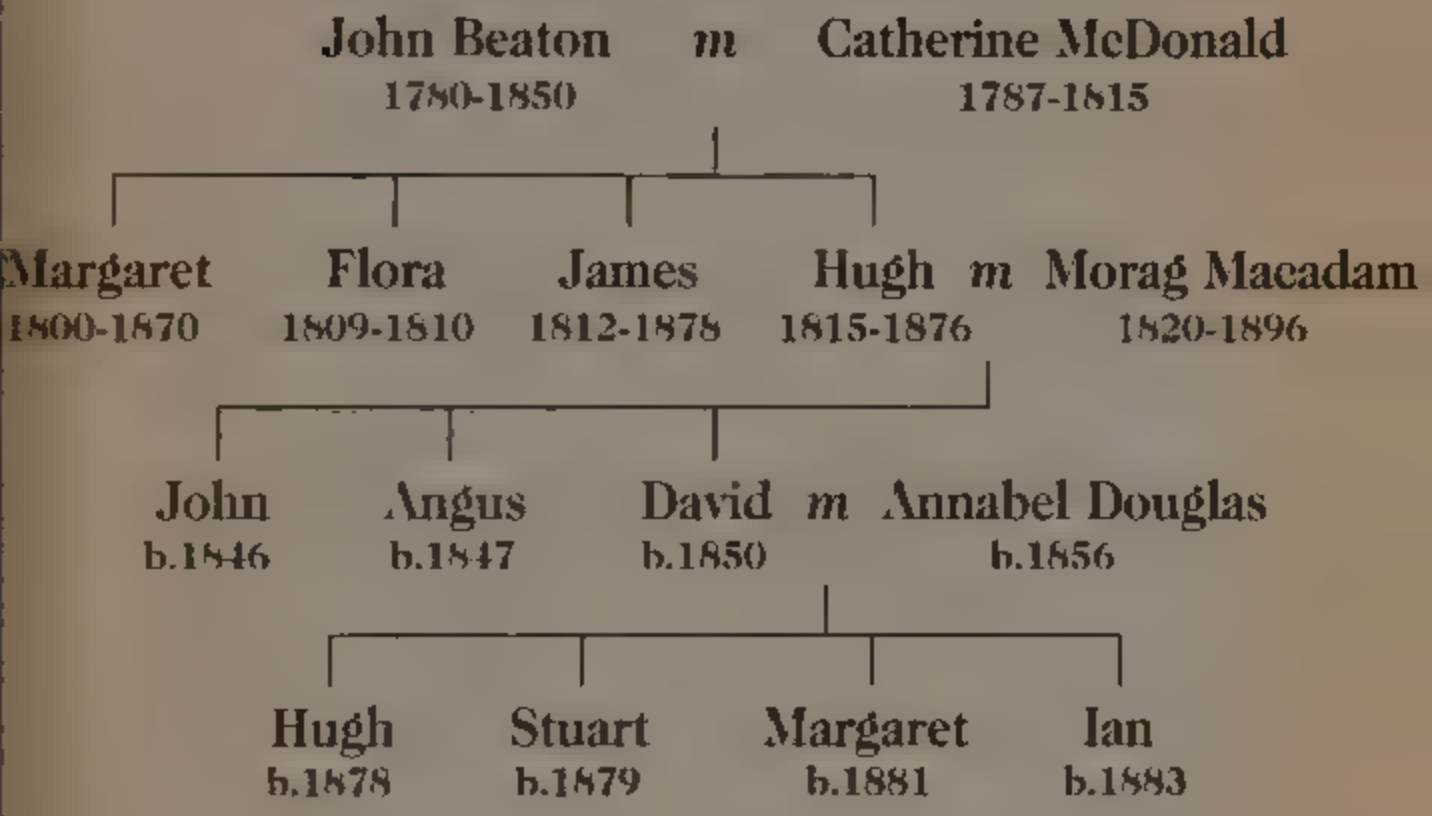
The Gorse in Bloom is dedicated to Dr George Hannah, who is today's embodiment of all that a rural general practitioner should be, also to Mr S N Yadav of Lorn and the Isles Hospital, Oban, and Professor W S George of Glasgow's Western Infirmary. Without the timely intervention of these three, this book might never have been written.

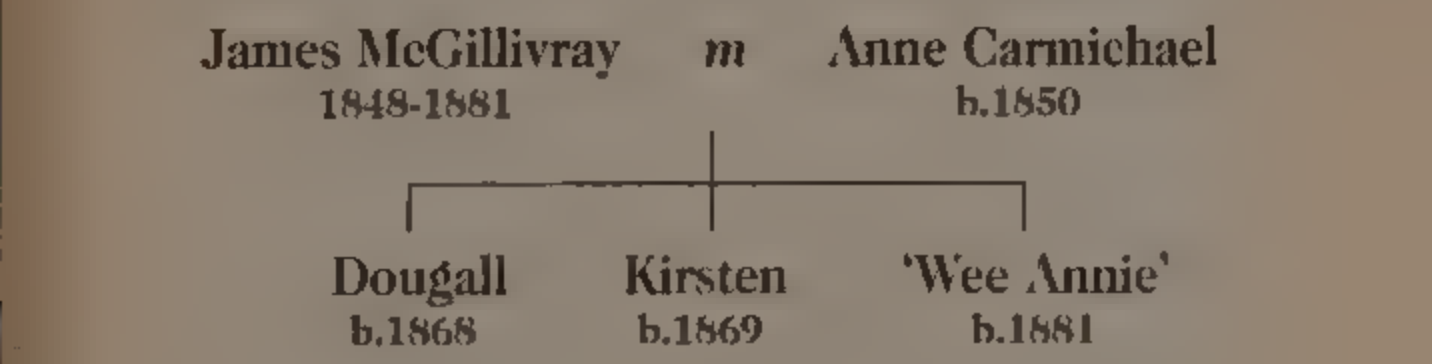
'When the gorse is not in bloom
Kissing's out of season' –

Old Saying

The Beaton Family



The McGillivray Family



PREFACE

In the entire county of Argyll there is nowhere which is more than twenty miles from the sea.

Parallel mountain ridges run in a north-easterly to south-westerly direction across the county and between lie valleys deeply scoured by glaciers during the Ice Age. Moraines have dammed some of the valleys creating vast inland lochs, while others are open to the sea and provide a haven for shipping and a means of communication for the most isolated communities.

Where long peninsulas of mountainous land stretch westwards into the Atlantic Ocean, the sea has worked away at the softer rocks, cutting off groups of islands. Some of these are several miles in length, while others are little more than sharp pinnacles of rock sticking up above the waves.

Eisdalsa is one such. Scarcely four square miles in area, its rich yield of slate rock provides a living for the four hundred men, women, and children dwelling there. Their single storey cottages crouch in the lee of a small hill composed of some hard volcanic material which bisects the otherwise denuded island.

Across a narrow stretch of water lies the much larger island of Seileach, where another group of quarriers' cottages huddle beside the shore. A wooden pier, large enough to serve the paddle steamer which plies daily between Fort William and Crinan, also provides a landing stage for local fishing boats, and for the ferry which runs between Eisdalsa Island and the village on Seileach.

At the end of the village street is the Manse, beyond which a narrow road continues along the shore, towards the school. A mile outside the village, sheltering beneath the precipitous crags of Caisteal an Spuilleadair, lies Tigh na Broch, the home of Dr David Beaton.

Now the road winds up and over Smiddy Brae and down to the crossroads where a turn to westward takes the traveller to the kirkyard. Beyond, the track leads upwards to St Brendan's kirk. For seven centuries some place of worship has stood here, overlooking the islands of Lunga and Eisdalsa, those strange triangular silhouettes of the Islands of the Sea, and the southern shores of Mull.

To the east the road leads the traveller the full length of Seileach, at whose north-eastern end stands an ancient bridge connecting the island with the mainland. The track is unmetalled and in places impassable by horse drawn carriage, except in the driest weather. A mile or so beyond the crossroads a southerly fork leads over a narrow mountain pass, and down into the valley which is occupied by Johnstone's croft. The road ends at the village of Ballachuan and the estate of Sir Henry Munro, the new tenant of Ballachuan House.

South from the crossroads a rather better made road runs on towards the next ridge of high ground upon which stands Creag castle, the summer home of the Marquis of Stirling and the permanent residence of his factor, Alexander Lugas.

It is summer, 1886. Nearly five years have passed since a disastrous storm devastated the slate quarrying industry of Eisdalsa.

Under the careful guidance of their Quarry Master, the Cornish engineer, William Whylie, the men have pumped out the seawater from the deepest workings and once again the tiny island rings during the long hours of daylight with the clash of hammers and the sound of blasting.

An unusually long period of sunny weather has enabled the workers to step up their production, and roofing slates of every size are stacked upon the quay awaiting transport

by sea. The harbour is busy with a small fleet of boats ferrying their cargo of slates to the ocean-going vessels at anchor in the bay. The men are happy to take full advantage of this dry spell, but the women are beginning to complain about a shortage of water.

PART I

Chapter 1

As Anne McGillivray lifted a heavy iron kettle from the hob and began to fill her precious Wemyss ware teapot, the afternoon steamer announced her arrival at Eisdalsa pier.

At the sound of the whistle, Elizabeth McIntyre jumped in her seat and her hand shot to her mouth to stifle her cry.

Anne smiled across at her friend, understanding, and sheepishly Elizabeth settled back in her chair.

'Even after nearly five years,' she observed, 'I still expect to see Gordon waving from the deck. I find it very hard to resist going out . . . just to make sure he is not there.'

Anne understood . . . oh, how she understood. On the night when Elizabeth's husband had perished, going down with his ship during the great storm of 1881, her own Jamie had died also. She too knew what it was to listen for a well-known footfall, to struggle to catch a familiar shout in the wind.

Elizabeth accepted the cup which Anne handed her, examining the delicate pattern on the porcelain.

'You have taken great care of this tea service, Anne.' Her mind went back to earlier days, when she had first come to the island to be the new schoolmistress. 'I recall using it the very first time I supped with you. Do you remember?'

'Indeed I do.' Anne sat down on the opposite side of the table. If Elizabeth noticed the quick glance towards the box bed in the corner of the room, she made no mention of it, but both women reflected upon that night. Anne's husband, James McGillivray, had sustained terrible injuries in an accident in the slate quarry and had been closer to death than any of them had imagined. Elizabeth could see him still, lying there in that bed, not speaking, apparently oblivious to all the activity

around him. If it had not been for the knowledge of the elderly Major Lovat and the surgical skill of Dr David Beaton, he would not have lived for those further, precious few years.

Distractedly, Elizabeth took a sip of tea and instantly recoiled.

'I cannot get used to this awful taste,' she declared. 'I will swear that the water is becoming more brackish by the day.'

'I mentioned it to Mr Whylie only yesterday,' Anne assured her. 'He has been trying to persuade the Council to carry a water-pipe across the Sound from Seileach.'

'If it would only rain,' declared Elizabeth, 'we might refill our water-butts and have no need to use the wells. I cannot remember so long a spell of dry weather.'

'We should be thankful that we do not live in the city,' Anne reminded her. 'In her last letter Kirsty says that instances of typhus and enteric fever are growing, and there are fears of a cholera epidemic in Glasgow.'

Elizabeth shuddered at the thought. It had been many years since that foul pestilence had appeared in Eisdalsa . . . the year after she had taken up her post as schoolmistress. Annabel had come from Glasgow to recuperate from the disease under the care of her mother's cousin Myra McCulloch. She had suffered a relapse and David had attended her.

Elizabeth smiled as she recalled how the young doctor had made it his business to call at the school every day, ostensibly to check for any signs of an outbreak amongst the children. But there had been another reason for his frequent visits. His feelings for Elizabeth herself had been obvious and had caused no little apprehension on her part. Much as she admired and respected David Beaton as a physician, Elizabeth knew that they could never resolve their differences about so many aspects of life – the status of women for one thing. She could not contemplate marriage to such an out and out supporter of male supremacy.

With indecent haste, David had found a new object for his attentions. Only a few months after Elizabeth had refused him, he and Annabel Stirling had been married. There was

considerable speculation in the village when Hugh, their first child, was born prematurely!

Perhaps Annabel was content to accept the secondary place in society to which David assigned all females, but from what Elizabeth had seen of his daughter, Margaret, he was likely to have quite a fight on his hands with her. The child was not only intellectually bright, but a more determined little tom-boy Elizabeth had yet to encounter. She foresaw a few battles in the years ahead.

Anne refilled the cups and persuaded her friend to try a piece of sponge cake.

'How is Kirsty coming along with her studies?' Elizabeth asked, sinking her teeth into the mouth watering confection. 'I am full of admiration for her, attempting the impossible in such a hostile, male-dominated environment. I suppose there is still no prospect of her being allowed to register?'

'It seems not,' Anne admitted, 'though at least she is not alone in her battle. There are three other women in the same position.' Anne had at last come to terms with her daughter's choice of career, and in recent times had been unstinting in her support for the girl's actions.

'I shall never forget David Beaton's face when she announced that she was determined to study medicine,' laughed Elizabeth. 'I am sure that he is still of the opinion that women cannot be exposed to the horrors of the sickroom without losing their femininity.'

'But surely Mrs Beaton was a nurse when they first met?'

'Oh, yes. But, of course, at that time it was fashionable for young ladies to follow in Miss Nightingale's footsteps . . . for a year or two. Remember, Annabel was only eighteen when she contracted cholera. She had hardly had sufficient time to become marked by her nursing experiences.'

'Kirsty maintains that it was Mrs Beaton who suggested the idea to her in the first place,' said Anne.

Elizabeth laughed again. 'I am sure that it was. And I can well imagine the exchange between husband and wife when David heard of it!'

'You have a wicked sense of humour,' observed Anne.

'Yes,' Elizabeth agreed, and thought wistfully of the merry conversations she had once enjoyed with Gordon on the subject of David Beaton's rather pompous attitude to women.

'Does William Whylie have any opinion of the reason for the poor quality of the well water?' Elizabeth turned the conversation away from a subject which held too many memories. In her role as clerk to the Quarry Company, Anne was always the first to know what was happening on the island.

'It seems that sea water may be seeping into the natural reservoir of water below ground. Mr Whylie thinks it may be something to do with the aftermath of the storm.'

Bad weather was such a feature of life on Eisdalsa Island that the casual visitor might suspect the islander of referring to any one of a number of severe gales. To those who dwelt there, however, there was only one storm worthy of mention: that which had caused a tidal wave to sweep across the island on that terrible November night in 1881. Sea water had filled the slate quarries, the only source of livelihood for five hundred souls; it had destroyed their vegetable plots and swept away their beasts. Where Anne and Elizabeth were concerned, it had also deprived each of a husband. Now, it seemed as if that same destructive force was responsible for the contamination of their fresh water supply.

'If that were the case, would we not have noticed the difference in the water before this?' Elizabeth argued. 'After all, it is more than four years since the storm.'

'But there have been four very wet summers. According to Mr Whylie, this present drought has caused the level of water to fall so low that we are now drawing up the very bottom layers, where the salt accumulates. The last I heard, he was demanding that barrels of fresh water be ferried across from Seileach.'

The sound of childish voices came from outside. The door flew open and on the threshold stood a diminutive figure who, except for her unruly pigtails and soiled pinafore, might have been a miniature replica of her mother.

'Och! Wee Annie, will ye mind and tak' o' yer boots. Why, yon stockings are soaking wet!'

'Me and Stuart were at the harbour, helping Mr McAllister to land his catch . . . wait!' She ran outside and returned immediately with two magnificent mackerel. 'He was so pleased with us that he gave us each two fishes for our teas.'

'I have told you before, I will not have you playing by the harbour when the boats are loading. Get in the way of the men working and you could be hurt.' Both mother and daughter understood the real reason for this scolding. Wee Annie knew that her daddie had died in an accident, at the harbour. They had often talked of it; of the night of the great storm when Wee Annie was born, and Jamie McGillivray had gone out to summon the doctor, never to return.

Anne, regaining her composure as quickly as she had lost it, enquired: 'Stuart Beaton? What was he doing on the island on a Monday afternoon? Surely he should have been in school?'

'Oh, it was history he should have had. Stuart does not need to study boring history. He knows more about it than Old Ogglie anyway!' With the utter conviction of her four and three-quarter years, Wee Annie staunchly defended her hero and Elizabeth could not prevent the chuckle that escaped her.

In an instant the child had lost her crestfallen expression. She had not really noticed Elizabeth until now. Kicking off the offending boots and casting them aside so that they landed in a heap beneath a wooden bench, she ran to Elizabeth.

'Hullo, Mrs McIntyre,' she cried excitedly. 'The Inspector, Mr Ford, came to test us at the school today and he asked after you.'

Elizabeth felt her face flush a little at this revelation. The School Inspector's attentions had always exceeded any professional requirement. Recently he had become more pressing in his advances. She could only hope that he was not going to become a nuisance.

'That was very kind of Mr Ford . . . to ask after you, I mean,' Anne teased. 'After all, it is a long time since you were involved with teaching the children.'

'What is more to the point,' Elizabeth observed hastily, 'is how you got on with Mr Ford yourself, Wee Annie. Did you have to show him your work?'

'We all had to recite either a piece from the Bible or some poetry. I said the poem about the wee mousie.'

'And what did Mr Ford say about that?' asked Elizabeth.

'He said, how did I learn it, and could I read the poem myself? I tell't him that it was you taught me to say it, Auntie. That was when he asked how you were.'

'What did you tell him?' Anne enquired, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

'I said Mrs McIntyre is very well, thank you for asking. I remembered to curtsy too. That was right, Aunt Elizabeth, wasn't it?' the child asked, anxiously.

She stroked the raven black tresses.

'You did very well,' she assured Wee Annie. 'You remembered every word, I hope?'

'Oh, yes, even:

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social – er – union . . .

Mr Ford said, did I understand what it meant? And I said yes, I did, because you had tell't me!'

'Told me,' Anne corrected her. 'Mrs McIntyre *told* you how to say it.'

'*Told* me,' the child repeated solemnly. Then, on another tack entirely, 'Margaret and the others will be coming to *our* school for the rest of the week,' she announced importantly.

'Really?' Elizabeth showed some surprise. It was very unusual for the children from the village on the much larger island of Seileach to be sent across to Eisdalsa for lessons. 'Did Miss Logie say why?'

'Old Ogglie is ill!' Wee Annie had taken no time at all to pick up the nicknames used in the school. Anne was dismayed that Elizabeth should hear this reference to Mr Ogilvie, the headmaster.

'Really, Wee Annie, how many times have I told you? You must not call people by their nicknames. You are far too young and it is very impolite!'

'Everyone knows him as Ogglie,' her daughter protested, but she ceased arguing when she saw her mother's expression. Not yet five years of age, she was nevertheless astute enough to know when she had gone too far.

'Wash your hands and sit down to your tea.' Briskly, Anne cleared a place on the white tablecloth. She cut bread and buttered it. Soon Wee Annie had fallen silent, too busy with satisfying her ravenous appetite to concern herself with entertaining their visitor.

Elizabeth, taking this as a signal that it was time for her to leave, rose to her feet and retrieved her hat from the settle.

'Must you go?' enquired Anne, disappointed. 'It is so seldom that we have time to have a really good crack these days.'

'I have promised William that I will go over the plans for the next series of evening lectures, for the men. We were to begin on Wednesday with a talk from Mr Ogilvie on Gaelic Mythology. It looks as though I might have to find another speaker.'

'Cannot Mr Whylie himself talk about something?' Anne queried. 'He knows so much, about so many things.'

Elizabeth looked at her friend quizzically. 'No Quarry Manager ever had a more eloquent champion,' she observed, and suddenly both women broke into peals of girlish laughter.

In truth neither Elizabeth nor Anne McGillivray felt that they had any need of male protection, and did not particularly welcome masculine attentions of a romantic nature. Each had been happily married and each had come to terms with widowhood in her own way.

Needing to earn the money to keep her family, Anne had persuaded William Whylie to allow her to take on Jamie McGillivray's duties in the Quarry Office.

Elizabeth, used as she was to a frugal existence, had no difficulty in making her late husband's small fortune stretch

to cover her daily needs. In addition, she taught some of the evening classes provided for the quarrymen and apprentices.

'Thank you so much for tea.' Elizabeth stood for a moment in the doorway. 'It's going to be a lovely evening, if the midges will only stay at home!'

Even as she spoke, a great cloud of the tiny marauders descended on her and she hurried across the green, all the while trying to shield her face from the attack.

Her route to William Whylie's house, on the far side of the harbour, was of necessity a circuitous one. At the head of the harbour, the islanders deposited all their household waste in a midden. In normal times, with ample rainfall and occasional high tides, the offensive pile was frequently removed by the waters. During the dry months of May and June this year, however, there had been no such sluicing. The midden was now so high, and so malodorous, that the people were obliged to make a detour around the cottages at the water's edge to get from one side of the harbour to the other.

When Elizabeth approached the Quarry Master's door she could hear male voices and laughter. She had hoped to find William alone at this hour. As she hesitated on the doorstep, the door was pulled open and she was confronted by the thin, bronzed figure of Murdo Campbell.

'Why, Mrs McIntyre,' he exclaimed. 'It is so seldom that I find time to visit Eisdalsa these days, to have the pleasure of meeting you adds greatly to my enjoyment.'

Turning in the doorway, he addressed his host. 'What a lucky fellow you are Whylie . . . to receive such a charming visitor!'

Elizabeth regarded the man with undisguised contempt.

'Good evening, sir,' she said disdainfully. 'Am I to presume that Mr Whylie is now disengaged?'

Campbell lurched towards her as though to take her hand. She drew back; the stench of spirits on his breath was very strong.

William Whylie appeared, somewhat disconcerted at Campbell's demeanour. The single glass of whisky that they

had taken could not be responsible for Murdo's condition. Clearly this had not been his first visit to the spirit bottle that day.

The Quarry Manager took Elizabeth's hand, gently easing her past his embarrassing visitor, and into the small hallway.

'Good evening, Elizabeth,' he greeted her apologetically. 'Mr Campbell is just leaving. Will you take a seat in the living-room? I will join you directly.'

Elizabeth smiled at her host and, without comment, left William to deal with the unsavoury character.

When she had first met Murdo Campbell, he had been greeted as a returning hero, basking in the success of his adventures in the South African gold fields. She had been so pleased to welcome him home that day nearly five years ago. Her colleague Katherine Logie had spoken so often of her fiancé, describing in glowing terms his handsome appearance and kindly, loving nature . . . and indeed, at first sight, Elizabeth had found no fault in her friend's assessment.

It had been her first trip on board the *Marquis of Stirling*, her husband's new command. How proud she had been to introduce Captain Gordon McIntyre to this bronzed young adventurer. How delighted she had been at the respect afforded to her husband by the younger man. Had she not been so much in love, and so intoxicated by the glorious weather on that day, she might have been a little more cautious in her response to Murdo Campbell's attentions. After Gordon's death, these became ever more amorous.

Dismayed by his disregard for Katherine, and repulsed by any suggestion that she herself might marry again, Elizabeth had rejected him out of hand.

Although Murdo had most certainly been struck by the beauty and vivacity of Mrs McIntyre when they had first met, it was Katherine herself who had been responsible for his changed attitude towards her. The girl had proved herself more than capable of providing for her own needs. In his absence she had carved out a career which made her

financially independent of her father, Malcolm, the peripatetic agent for the Eisdalsa Quarry Company. Although she had declared herself willing to forgo her teaching, once they were married, she had suggested that she might do a little private tutoring. Murdo, preferring a woman to be helpless and pliable, decided to teach her a lesson. By paying his attentions to the pretty widow, he thought to bring Katherine to heel. The result of his clumsy manoeuvring had been summary rejection by both Katherine and Elizabeth, and the latter was not pleased by this unexpected meeting with him.

'I am sorry I can be of no help with regard to supplying you with men, Campbell.' William shook Murdo's hand in a genial manner. 'But I am pleased to hear that we shall see the Lunga quarries in operation again. I am only sorry that I cannot suggest where you may find some experienced crews. It may be you will have to seek out people from the east coast . . . or even Wales, where they have many slate quarries. Of course, that will mean housing their families but such an influx of people can only help to restore the prosperity of the whole area.'

Murdo lurched awkwardly, nearly stumbling over a boulder lying by the path.

'Make no mistake, Whylie,' he declared, less friendly now, 'I intend to get me a workforce by fair means or foul. All's fair in love and trade, y'know.' His drunken laughter rang across the harbour.

Anxious to be rid of the fellow, William bade him a terse 'Good'evening' and closed the door.

Elizabeth settled comfortably in William's armchair, and surveyed the familiar room with pleasure. Mrs McLean, William's housekeeper, kept the house immaculate. The heavy mahogany furniture gleamed where the evening sun, slanting through the deeply recessed windows, touched intricate carving, throwing it into sharp relief. Brasses shone by the open fireplace, in whose mouth there stood a huge vase of gorse and grasses, and a few brighter blooms. Not many larger wild flowers survived on the windswept island of Eisdalsa, and most

folk utilised the limited pockets of good soil for the growing of vegetables. Such flowering plants as could be found grew close to the ground, or hid behind the rocks and boulders.

'What beautiful marsh marigolds, William,' she commented as her host entered the room and sat down opposite her, looking decidedly uncomfortable. 'These were not growing on the island, surely?'

'Eh? Oh, no.' He was clearly disconcerted. 'I picked them myself on my way back from seeing the Major yesterday.'

'What is it, William? You seem very out of sorts,' she enquired solicitously.

'That fellow Campbell . . . he has leased the slate exposures on Lunga and is opening a new quarry at the northern end of the island in the next few weeks,' William explained in disconsolate tones.

'Will that affect the Eisdalsa works in any way?'

'Not really. In fact a larger output from the area as a whole would tend to encourage the bigger clients to come here for their roofing slates.'

'Then why so gloomy?' she queried brightly, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

'It's just that he came here looking for a good crew to get him started. I told him that my men are now all fully occupied, and that I cannot spare him anyone.'

'What will he do then? Are there no other places where the men are not so well supplied with work?'

'I am sure there are,' William agreed, 'but my feeling is that Campbell has no intention of going beyond his own backyard for men. He would rather poach mine, by offering higher wages.'

Anxious not to pursue the subject of Murdo Campbell, Elizabeth turned the conversation to the object of her visit.

'I understand that Mr Ogilvie is unwell and not likely to be available for the class on Wednesday evening. Can you suggest any alternative?'

'I had planned to introduce a few lectures on the subject of astronomy later in the year.' William, in his usual gentlemanly

fashion, set aside his own problem to attend to that of his guest. 'The night skies are so bright and clear these days, it would be a grand opportunity for an exploration of the planets.'

'That is a splendid idea,' Elizabeth exclaimed, delighted. 'Do you have any objection to my attending the lectures myself? I have always wanted to learn about the stars.'

'None at all, my dear,' he replied, 'but I should warn you that I intend to delve into the science of navigation also. That is what interests the seafarers amongst us.'

'I would enjoy that too,' she replied. Then, teasing him, 'I am not such a dunce as you gentlemen would believe, when it comes to mathematics!'

David Beaton listened intently to his patient's breathing, removed the thermometer from beneath his tongue and studied it thoughtfully.

'When did the diarrhoea first begin, Mrs Ogilvie?' he asked abruptly.

Ellen Ogilvie shrank from the mention of such an unpleasant subject.

'I believe that the Dominie first rose from his bed at about three o'clock this morning, Doctor.'

'And he has been vomiting, in addition to the flux?'

The woman straightened her back, pursed her lips and held her hands tightly together against her serviceable black serge dress.

'I believe so . . . yes,' she agreed reluctantly.

'It is now six o'clock in the evening.' David did not mince his words. 'What took you so long to call me?'

He had no need to ask. The Ogilvies, husband and wife, were the most unwilling of his patients to part with money. If the woman could nurse her husband without recourse to medical advice, she would certainly do so. She must therefore have been very worried, to call for him.

'He seemed so pale and limp,' she confessed. 'When he could no longer get himself to the commode, I knew that I must send for you, Doctor.'

'You have waited far too long, madam. Your husband is severely dehydrated. If I cannot get fluids into him immediately, I have little hope for his recovery. What is more, his condition is highly contagious. I shall have to take drastic measures to isolate the infection.'

David was not usually quite so blunt in dealing with anxious relatives. In this case, however, he knew that unless he shook the woman into an understanding of the gravity of the situation, she might skimp on the precautions to be introduced.

'What is it, Doctor? What ails Mr Ogilvie?'

'Good God, woman, I thought that you grew up in Glasgow. Surely you have heard of cases of this kind, and recognise the signs of a very serious condition!'

'What are you saying? What is the matter with my husband?'

'With these symptoms it might have been typhoid, but there is only a slightly raised temperature. No, Mrs Ogilvie, I fear that your husband has cholera. I shall take away samples, to be sent to the laboratory in Glasgow for confirmation.

'In the meantime, we must act as though it is indeed cholera. You, and other members of your household, must send away all callers. I will give you a list of actions to be taken to prevent a spread of the disease, although I fear that I may already be too late to stop the schoolchildren from being infected.'

Part of his anger was due to anxiety for his own three children who had attended school today as usual. Suppose that the infection came from something eaten or drunk in the schoolroom . . .

'Tell me,' he demanded, 'who took the classes today, since your husband was unable?'

'Tom Cleary, the pupil teacher, took the older ones. I myself looked after the infants. I take them for handcrafts anyway, so it was not difficult to rearrange the lessons.'

'Would any of the children have eaten or drunk anything on the premises?'

'I don't think so,' she replied warily. 'There was some bad behaviour so I refused to allow the children out at

mid-morning. With Mr Ogilvie so ill, I decided to cancel afternoon classes and sent the children home at one o'clock.'

'Thank heaven for small mercies,' David murmured to himself, and proceeded to instruct the household in the matter of containing the disease within the premises.

'As few different people as possible to come into the sickroom . . . if you can manage by yourself, ma'am, with just one servant, that would be best.' Mrs Ogilvie looked so stunned that David made sure the housekeeper was fully informed of the duties to be carried out.

'All utensils used by the patient to be sterilised in boiling water, and kept exclusively for his use. All bedlinen to be soaked in disinfectant and boiled separately from other clothing . . .' He carried on with the list of instructions, satisfied that the servant at least was taking in his words. '. . . above all, he must be kept warm. Hot bottles, heated bricks, plenty of blankets. But at the same time, keep the windows open, so that what little breeze there is gets through the room. Now, do you have any questions for me?'

The housekeeper asked, 'Is he to eat or drink anything, sir?'

'I shall provide a solution of salts which you must get him to swallow . . . as much as possible, but no less than a pint every two hours. If he cannot take the fluids by mouth, I shall have to try another method.'

The administration of fluids by intravenous means was still in its infancy, but David had heard of successes in other cases of cholera. With his patient so severely dehydrated, it might be the only way to save him.

'Now, Mrs Ogilvie,' his tone had softened when he realised the woman's genuine distress, 'will you oversee the carrying out of my instructions here? I must go and prepare the potions necessary for your husband's recovery, and give orders for precautions to be taken throughout the community. In weather conditions such as these, there is no knowing how quickly the disease may spread.'

He gathered up his instruments and left the two women to get on with their work.

As he neared Tigh na Broch, David caught sight of his wife and his mother, seated on the grassy slope before the house, enjoying the late-afternoon sunshine. Without approaching any closer, he called to them: 'We have a case of cholera in the village . . . inevitable really.'

'Is it Mr Ogilvie?' As Annabel got up to come to him he warned her, 'We will have to set up some system of isolating me from the children. I can stay in the surgery and sleep on the couch until this blows over. Leave my meals in the passage, behind the study door.'

'Oh, dear,' cried Annabel, 'is it really necessary to be quite so cautious? I seem to remember you were not so strict a few years ago.'

'The disease is food- and water-borne, that is true, but if I am to be exposed to a number of cases, it would be wise to keep away from the family. Yours was an isolated incident, and you had brought the disease into the district with you. This is quite different; the source is local and may already have affected a number of people. Incidentally, be sure to ask the children if any of them ate or drank anything at all when they were in school today. It is very important that they tell us . . . now!'

'Oh, David, you don't think . . . you can't mean . . . that one of them might catch cholera?'

'Not if I can prevent it,' he declared. 'Now, you know the precautions we must all take. I can rely on you to see that everything is done in the house, to prevent infection?'

'Of course,' his wife assured him. 'Morag and I will get to it immediately. Only . . .' She hesitated, knowing that her confession would annoy him.

'What?' he demanded, anxious now to get on with the preparation of the remedies for Ogilvie.

'Hugh and Margaret came home after school was dismissed, but Stuart went over to the island. He is still there now.'

'Angus Murchison will have to fetch him back.' David was more concerned than angry. As his wife turned to go and summon their elderly retainer, he called her again.

'I will write a note for William which Angus can take over with him, and one for the Reverend McCulloch too . . . he can alert the people on this side. Everyone will have to try to contain the disease, boiling all water, disinfecting their houses and so on. Once I have settled Ogilvie, I will draw up some instructions.'

'There is no need for you to worry yourself about that,' Annabel assured him. 'I will write out what is necessary and Hugh can help me to make some copies. You get along now and look after the Dominie.'

Some years before, David had forsaken a promising career as a London surgeon in order to continue the work begun at Eisdalsa by his father, Hugh Beaton.

While his situation might be thought by some to be too remote for him to be able to follow the latest trends in medical science, he had discovered that a limited workload gave him the time for reading and investigation often denied those of his colleagues who spent their days in the wards of the great hospitals.

David had been fortunate enough to be taken under the wing of Joseph Lister, while he was a young dresser in the Edinburgh Infirmary. From the great man he had learned the antiseptic techniques to which a number of Eisdalsa quarrymen already owed their lives. The present of a powerful and sophisticated microscope, made by Joseph's equally famous father, had given David the opportunity to study, at firsthand, the bacteria which Pasteur had recognised as the cause of sepsis and which Lister had spent so many years learning to control. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that David had already experimented with another new technique – that of transfusing a saline solution into the veins of animals. He had tried the operation on one of their own piglets from the farm which formed part of the Beatons' modest estate. The animal had survived long enough to grow to be of interest to McFinnie, the butcher. Following that success, David had practised on the family dog, one night after the children and

Annabel were secure in their beds. The dog had suffered no ill effects, and apparently bore him no grudge.

Now the time had come to try out the technique in earnest. David was a trifle apprehensive, but the condition of his patient suggested that there was little chance of a recovery by conventional means. He had nothing to lose.

With his bag packed with the necessary equipment and medicaments, the doctor set off for the village on foot. It was no more than a mile to the schoolmaster's house, and David needed the time to think through the coming operation.

Mrs McPhail, the housekeeper, opened the door to him. Her face told him all he needed to know.

To his enquiry, she answered, 'The master has not opened his eyes for twenty minutes or more, Doctor.' Then she confided in a whisper, 'The mistress is fair distraught.'

He entered the bedroom quietly and examined his patient. The schoolmaster was certainly in a deep coma, as the servant had suggested. Gently, he led her mistress to one side of the room.

'Mrs Ogilvie, ma'am, your husband is near to death and I cannot save him by conventional means.'

The despairing sob emitted from that normally stony-faced woman was sufficient to encourage David to continue.

'There is something that I can do to increase his fluids, if you will allow me, but I must warn you that I have never tried this operation before and cannot guarantee its success.'

Ellen Ogilvie composed her features before replying.

'Please, Doctor, do whatever you can. I know that without your help he will die.'

'I can only try,' said David quietly. 'Come, let us set about our work.'

Lifting the limp forearm of the comatose schoolmaster, David tried to locate a vein, at first with little success. Satisfied at last, he inserted into the blood vessel a coarse, hollow glass needle to whose distal end was attached a simple syringe. As David pulled back the plunger, a quantity of thick, almost black, blood flowed into the tube. The appearance of

the blood was itself confirmation of his diagnosis. Detaching the syringe, he replaced it with a tube filled from a bottle containing saline solution. The connections were tricky, as David had discovered when trying out the system on his animal patients. The problem was to ensure that no air bubbles entered the apparatus during the exchanges, for these might transfer to the patient's blood vessel and cause him to die. Having examined the length of tubing and the needle carefully for any trace of air, he released a valve which allowed a flow of saline straight into the patient's blood circulatory system.

For a time, no one in the room spoke or even moved. All eyes were fixed on the tube, through which the life-giving fluid ran down to the patient's forearm.

David quickly tired of holding the saline reservoir above his head. Seeing his difficulty, Mrs McPhail arranged a sling that would attach the bottle to a lamp bracket, protruding from the wall above the bed.

It was not long before those watching noticed a distinct change in the colour of Ogilvie's skin. The bluish tinge had been replaced by a much healthier pink. He moaned slightly and then opened his eyes.

David, seeking to reassure his patient and at the same time prevent him from disconnecting the apparatus, knelt on the floor beside him and held his forearm.

Although very weak, Ogilvie turned his head to look at his wife. She came forward, and in a movement totally alien to her, grasped her husband's free hand and held it, willing him to recover.

The bottle of saline fluid was nearly empty. With Mrs McPhail's assistance, David withdrew the needle from Ogilvie's arm. With a swift dab of carbolic-soaked cotton, he pressed on the open wound until the blood stopped flowing, then bound the arm.

'We are not out of the wood yet, ma'am,' he said to Mrs Ogilvie. 'Should there be further flux or vomiting, I may have to repeat the operation, but he will do well enough for now.'

The doctor arrived home to find several urgent requests

to attend a number of young patients in the village. All were from the school. It was as David had feared; the children would almost certainly have drunk water from the school supply.

Into the early hours of the morning he worked among the tiny cottages, some no more than mud hovels, trying to relieve the distress of his young patients. Apart from administering chloroform in cases of severe cramp, he could do no more than advise the parents to carry out the same procedures he had used on Ogilvie. Fortunately, the younger patients received their treatment early, and although dehydration occurs more rapidly in a smaller body, most did not reach the extreme condition in which he had found Ogilvie. Nevertheless, by the end of the first week, ten children were dead, several adults were also presenting symptoms of the disease, and despite all the warnings and the measures which William had immediately implemented to reduce the possible sources of infection, David clearly had an epidemic on his hands.

By nine o'clock on the second day, word had travelled out into the neighbouring villages. This was a great relief to David who had no desire to see the cholera infection being spread abroad. Although there had never been an epidemic of the disease in the district within living memory, there was no parishioner who did not appreciate the dangers.

One person who was determined to help, despite his great age, was Major Lovat, the retired army surgeon who had come to live out his days at Ballachuan Bay, and who had proved a great source of encouragement to David in his early days in the parish.

Word quickly reached family and friends who had moved away to the city. Among these was Kirsty McGillivray, in her second year as a medical student at Glasgow University. On the morning that her mother's letter arrived with the dreadful news, she packed her few possessions and set off for home.

Chapter 2

Archie McLean counted the barrels of water on the cart and called out to the younger men, sweating from their efforts despite the fact that the sun had not yet risen above Caisteal an Spuilleadair.

'Just those last two, lads, and that will be enough for today.' He helped Hamish McFarlane to push his load tight up against the rest of the barrels and, together, the two men lifted the tailboard and fastened it securely. Down in the bed of the stream, the rest of the water-carriers were sluicing themselves off in one of the few deeper pools still existing. After weeks of drought, the water was low and what was normally a seething torrent, cascading down the hillside behind the village school, was now a mere trickle, barely enough to flow around some of the larger boulders in its bed.

'Have you heard how the Dominie is now?' Will Fraser asked, splashing water over his powerful shoulders. 'I hear the village children are having to go to the island school until he is well.'

'Aye, and a real handful it is that Miss Logie has to be dealing with, I'm thinking. Yon village weans is not so well behaved as our island babbies.'

The two men nodded knowingly. In all things, there was no comparison between islanders and village folk. It stood to reason that Eisdalsa's bairns would knock the socks off the Seileachies when it came to learning, and sports, and everything else. Nevertheless, the two men doffed their caps respectfully as they caught a glimpse of the headmaster's wife through the hedge.

'Good morning, ma'am,' Hamish greeted the lady. 'How is the Dominie the day?'

'A little improved, thank you,' Ellen Ogilvie replied. 'Are you going across to Eisdalsa?'

'Just waiting for the tide, ma'am,' old Archie answered for them. Mr Whylie would be expecting his men to be back cutting the slates, just as soon as the water had been delivered.

'Ah, Mr McLean!' Relieved to see the dependable figure of the retired quarryman, Ellen Ogilvie felt confident that her message would be delivered. 'Would you be so kind as to inform Miss Logie that the Dominie is too unwell to think of setting work for his pupils. Will you ask her to occupy the children as best she can until Mr Ogilvie is better?'

'I will give her the message, ma'am.' Archie touched his cap again and hustled his men away.

David had considered closing both the schools once the nature of the headmaster's illness was confirmed, but it seemed pointless to have a horde of youngsters roaming the area with time on their hands, when he had no idea where the source of the infection might be. As yet there had been no instance of cholera on Eisdalsa, which suggested that there was no pollution there. Having applied the most stringent regulations to the treatment of household wastes, and confident that William would implement these rigorously, he could see no reason to deprive the youngsters of their lessons. The number of cases of cholera amongst the village children seemed to be restricted to that end of the village housing the poorest families. These had been isolated already. He felt it was safe to let the rest of the people carry on as usual.

Across the narrow Sound, on the island of Eisdalsa, Katherine Logie found her classes greatly swollen by the influx of pupils from Seileach. She was hard pressed to keep them all busy. After a tiring morning, she decided upon a treat for the children.

'We will have a race,' she declared. 'The older children will run in a Seileach team against one from the island. The

route shall be right round the hill, and back. It will be good practice for the *real* games, later on.'

There was a buzz of excitement, until Katherine clapped her hands and addressed the older children. 'Now, who will race for the islanders?'

The eldest boy in the class was Tom McAllister. He stood head and shoulders above his classmates and was a certain choice. Modesty held him back until he received a sharp push from behind and found himself volunteering.

'Well done, Tom,' Katherine encouraged him. 'Now what about you, Rory? Will you not join your brother?' Two years Tom's junior, Rory McAllister was lighter in weight, but shorter by only a couple of inches, and his long legs had carried him to victory in last year's Highland Games. His classmates wasted no time in pushing forward their champion. Soon two other boys and a pair of giggling lassies were also chosen to run for the islanders' team.

'Now,' said Katherine, turning to the visitors, 'I think I will have to leave it to you to pick your own team. Who is the eldest?'

'I am,' declared Hugh Beaton, 'but my brother Stuart is the better runner.'

'He is the eldest by only a few days!' declared a beefy-looking lad whose skin was the colour of ripe tomatoes. Hector Johnstone was the son of one of the more prosperous of the crofters. His schooling suffered greatly from his frequent absences during lambing, shearing, and harvesting, but Katherine knew him to be a good-hearted fellow, if shy. She was pleased to see him putting himself forward in this way.

'Very well,' she agreed. 'If we have Hugh, Stuart and Hector, we need just one more boy and two girls to make up the villagers' team.'

Quickly the remaining contestants were chosen and pickets were sent out, in matched pairs, to ensure that all competitors followed the chosen course and that no short cuts were taken.

The route around the island was about two miles in distance. The terrain was quite rough and there were several diversions

in order to avoid the quarry workings. Katherine was anxious not to interfere with William Whylie's workmen in any way.

Wee Annie McGillivray and her best friend, Margaret Beaton, had elected to accompany the stewards who were to take up position by the old well on the far side of the island.

As the two little girls made their way across the green, they were deep in conversation. Nearing the McGillivray house, Annie called out to the two stewards, 'We will catch you up in a few minutes.'

While the older children continued on their way, Annie and Margaret slipped inside the house.

'Look, Margaret, you collect up those beakers. They are metal and won't break. You can carry them in this.'

She had to stand on a chair to reach the mugs and was close to falling as she stretched across to unhook a carrying bag made of string, like a fishing net.

'Mother boiled this jugful at breakfast this morning,' confided Annie, lifting down a brown earthenware jug. 'Do you think it will be enough?'

'It is almost too heavy to carry now,' said Margaret, trying the weight for herself. 'It will have to do.'

'What have you got there?' asked Amy McPherson, who was the steward for the island team.

It had taken the two little girls much longer to reach the well than they had expected, since they were obliged to stop every few minutes to exchange their burdens.

'We have brought some water for the runners,' said Annie, pleased to have been the one to think of it.

'Why, you silly goose!' said Amy. 'Fancy carrying that all the way out here. There's water in the well.'

'But we are not to drink water if it's not been boiled,' Margaret protested.

'Well, you wouldn't catch me hauling that lot all this way,' jeered Simon Strachie.

Margaret and Annie ignored the older children. Carefully, they arranged their mugs on the rim of the old well and poured

a little water into each of them, ready for the runners as they came past.

They heard a roar from the far side of the hill as the race started. It would be some time before the runners appeared on the western shore of the island. The two older children sidled up to the well, and Simon reached across for a mug of water.

'Oh no you don't!' Annie cried angrily, grabbing hold of his arm and making him spill much of the water. 'You have done none of the running, and there is only enough for the proper people.'

Ignoring her, the boy swallowed what remained of the water, and threw down the mug. Amy giggled, while the two little girls could hardly contain their fury.

'Just you wait 'til I tell my brother Stuart about you!' Margaret shouted after them as Simon and Amy retreated along the path to where a large boulder marked the check point they were manning.

It was ten minutes or more before the first of the runners came into view. Stuart Beaton was ahead of Tom McAllister as they turned on to the path which took them past the well.

As Stuart reached the two stewards, Amy ticked his name off on a list she carried, while Simon did the same for Tom. As the two competitors passed Annie and Margaret, Annie offered a mugful of water to Stuart.

'Aye, I could do with that, Wee Annie, a great thought!' He swallowed the tepid drink quickly and handed the mug back. Without another word he was off again, tearing along after Tom who, having resisted the temptation of taking refreshment, had gained an advantage.

Hugh, who was finding the run much more of a trial than he had expected, was only too happy to pause for the drink which Margaret handed to him. Other runners came and went, some too anxious to get on with the race to bother with the drinks offered. Many, however, were much relieved to swallow a mouthful of water and feel a little cooler, if only for a few minutes.

* * *

The two leading runners approached the schoolhouse at a punishing rate. Spurred on by cheers of encouragement from the onlookers, it was Tom who was the first to fling himself forward against the tape.

'Drinks are ready inside,' called Katherine, and Stuart, needing no second bidding, disappeared into the cool dimness of the schoolhouse.

Tom, too exhausted to walk another step, ignored her invitation and instead took the ladle which always hung by the schoolroom door, and dipped it into the barrel of water which Archie had delivered that morning. He was halfway through his second ladleful when Hugh and Hector arrived, neck and neck, at the tape. Hugh stumbled inside and collapsed on a bench beside his brother. Hector, however, taking Tom's lead, grabbed the ladle and plunged it into the water barrel.

Inside the schoolroom, Katherine handed out mugs of water, carefully boiled that morning, according to William's instructions. It was when she realised that they would need a second ladle, to cope with serving the remainder of the runners and their supporters, who were now arriving from points all round the island, that she went outside and found several more children drinking from the barrel.

'Give me that ladle, Martha Irvine,' she cried urgently. 'Have I not already told you that you must only drink the water that has been boiled! Now come along inside, all of you. There is plenty of boiled water for everybody.'

When David was called out, two days later, to the McAllisters' house on the island, he found Tom in the first stage of cholera. His temperature was quite high; 102° was about average for the disease. He had vomited soon after his mother had sent him off to bed, but it was the diarrhoea which had finally persuaded the worried parents to call out the doctor in the middle of the night.

'I am so sorry, Doctor, to fetch you from your bed.' Mrs McAllister ushered him into the cramped little kitchen where

the patient lay in a box bed which normally held both the brothers.

'I thought it best to send Rory up the stair tonight,' she explained, 'his brother being so restless.'

'Very wise, Mrs McAllister,' David assured the distraught woman, at the same time making a careful examination of the sick boy.

'There is very little doubt that he has the cholera, I'm afraid.' David proceeded to give the instructions which he could now recite automatically. His greatest concern was to discover the source of the disease. He did not believe it possible that this very sensible woman had not taken all the precautions already recommended.

'I cannot understand it, Doctor,' Mrs McAllister declared. 'Not an item of food or drink have the boys taken in this house which was not boiled as Mr Whylie directed. We have been more than usually careful about the use of the privy . . .' As her protests tailed off, her eyes filled with tears and she clung to her spouse who, all this while, had stood silent, calmly taking in everything the doctor told them.

'I have no doubt that you have done exactly as advised, ma'am,' David tried to reassure her. 'Children are sometimes thoughtless when they are much taken up with their own affairs. Tom must have drunk some contaminated water at some time in the last few days. The disease does not usually appear for a while after the germs have been ingested. It can be as much as five days before recognisable symptoms occur.'

As he began to gather together his instruments, a noise from above his head attracted his attention. He looked up into the face of the younger McAllister boy, Rory.

'Get back to your bed now, son,' the father said to him, not unkindly. 'The doctor has settled Tom for the night, you can do him no good by staying awake.'

'Should I keep Rory away from the school tomorrow, Doctor?' Mrs McAllister asked anxiously.

'Cholera is only transmitted through infected water and food, Mrs McAllister,' he tried to hearten her. 'Provided that

Rory observes all the rules of hygiene, he should be no danger to others. However, you might try to get both the boys to recall where they have eaten and drunk anything outside the home these past few days. I must know where the infection is coming from. If Rory shows the least sign of Tom's symptoms, start the treatment immediately, and send for me.'

In his nest of heather and blankets, in the airless space beneath the roof, Rory McAllister listened for the doctor's footsteps on the gravel path and soon heard his muffled call to Tam the ferryman as he approached the harbour steps.

'Polluted water,' he muttered to himself. 'It was the well water . . . when we were running.' He himself had been grateful to accept Wee Annie McGillivray's offer of refreshment. And now he was going to get the cholera too, he was quite sure.

The trip down the Clyde aboard the steamer filled Kirsty with a tension and a sense of expectancy which was deeply rooted in her childhood.

Once every year she had accompanied her parents, and her brother, Dougal, on a visit to her grandparents in Larkhall. She recalled the excitement as the steamer eventually drew in to the pier at Port Glasgow; she remembered so clearly that mad scramble for luggage and the overwhelming cacophony of sounds which fell upon ears more accustomed to sea birds' cries, and the sound of breaking waves on the shore.

Fondly she recalled her father's strong arms grabbing her up and setting her on his shoulders so that she should not be trampled on in the crowd. Just the thought of it conjured up the feel of his rough tweed jacket against her cheek, and the lingering scent of tobacco when she clung to him, her tiny arms locked tight around his neck.

How she had adored that gentle giant of a man! Father and daughter shared a rare affinity which, much as she loved her, Kirsty had never managed to find with her mother. After the accident in the quarry, when for weeks Jamie McGillivray had lain in his bed, unable to move his shattered leg, it had been Kirsty who had responded to his every need . . .

seeming to know instinctively when to talk, when to be silent, and when to make him laugh.

She was still aware of the hollow place which his death had left in her heart. She recalled the night that her father had been drowned. How proud she had been to be allowed to help Dr David to deliver her baby sister. It had been Kirsty who had been asked to name the newborn child . . . even now she could see that tiny screwed-up face with its dark, penetrating gaze, so like her mother's. Kirsty had called the baby Annie. Jamie must have been dead already, before the baby arrived . . . how pleased he would have been to know that he had another daughter, and so like her mother.

In her reverie, Kirsty had been quite unaware of the shoreline slipping by, and was startled to hear a voice announcing their approach to Ardrishaig pier. She gathered her few pieces of baggage and made her way to the gangway.

The steamer was crowded with holiday-makers, going home for the Glasgow Fair. With scant employment prospects in the rural parts of Argyll, most younger folk made their way to the city as soon as they were old enough to leave home. Each July, when for a whole week the factories and shipyards closed down, these emigrants returned to the villages and crofts where they had been born.

In the crush to get ashore, Kirsty was more than grateful to find herself rubbing shoulders with a familiar figure who now took from her the larger of her two portmanteaux and in a masterly fashion steered her through the throng making its way towards the Crinan Canal landing stage.

'Why, Peter Lugas!' she gasped, delighted by his interception, but having to run to keep up with him. 'What brings you back to Eisdalsa so early in the term? Have you finished your studies already?'

'Not exactly,' the young man replied, looking somewhat embarrassed.

The two of them hurried on, and were among the first to board the canal boat *Linnet* which plied daily between Ardrishaig, on Loch Fyne, and the village of Crinan, carrying

ongoing passengers to join the ocean-bound steamer for Oban and Fort William.

Soon, out of breath and heated by their exertions, they had settled themselves on the upper deck of the strange little vessel. Despite Peter's obvious reluctance to continue with the earlier topic, Kirsty was not deterred.

'The University year has not yet ended in Glasgow,' she commented. 'I understood Edinburgh to follow the same pattern?'

'The fact is, I have not been attending classes for some months past,' Peter Lugas admitted, 'I was thrown out for insufficient attendances . . . and other matters.'

If he expected any sympathy for his predicament from this auburn-headed, freckle-faced Highland lass, he was disappointed.

She flashed an accusing look at him from piercingly blue eyes.

'Your father will be very disappointed,' she observed.

'He knows nothing . . . yet. I have to find some way of breaking the news to him.'

'You have waited a long time to make your confession,' she pointed out. 'It will not be any easier for the delay.'

Peter did not need this quarryman's daughter to tell him how to behave.

'You are obviously cutting your own studies short,' he snapped. 'What, pray, are your reasons for not completing your course?'

'Have you not heard of the outbreak of cholera at Eisdalsa?' she asked him. 'I have obtained permission from my tutors to go home to help care for the sick. Dr Beaton has only the old Major, Dr Lovat, to assist him . . . there is not even a qualified nurse available, with so much fever in the city.'

'Oh, but of course, it is you who are studying to be a doctor. I had quite forgotten.' Peter seemed genuinely interested. In truth he had always enjoyed Kirsty McGillivray's tomboyish antics in class, although he was often irritated by the apparent ease with which she accomplished any academic task. He had

not been at all surprised when she created a stir by declaring her intention to study medicine.

'Tell me,' he enquired, 'how do the medical men react to women in their classes?'

'Not very well, I must confess,' Kirsty laughed. 'There are three other women in my group. Between us, we try to occupy the top position in every subject . . . it is the only way to avoid ridicule from both lecturers and male students. We have to prove that we are more than adequate for the task, in every respect!'

'I can imagine,' Peter said thoughtfully, and felt more than a little ashamed when he compared the struggle this girl was having, in order to reach her goal, with the careless manner in which he himself had thrown away every opportunity placed in his path.

'The greatest hurdle is yet to come,' declared Kirsty, with a rueful smile. 'When all the lectures are finished and we are examined, there is still no guarantee that we women will be allowed to graduate.'

'Do you mean to say, that having proved you are the equal of your male colleagues, you may yet be prevented from practising as physicians?' exclaimed Peter. 'Whyever not?'

'Oh, there are many arguments against us,' Kirsty expounded. 'It is said that the female mind lacks the cool and unemotional approach required of a physician. They say that our frames are not strong enough to bear the burden of concentrated study, and that women cannot be exposed to some of the more gruesome and distressing sights which are the province of the surgeon.'

'Why, that is monstrous!' Peter's rage at such illogical casuistry surprised even himself. One could not grow up amongst quarry workers and not see, on any day, women competently attending to the gory injuries sustained by their menfolk.

'I suppose the most persistent argument, however,' Kirsty continued, 'is that no man would want to marry a woman

who has examined the naked bodies of other men!' Her peal of laughter at this most outrageous of suggestions was enough to draw the gaze of the other passengers around them. She blushed when she realised her words might have been overheard, and Peter gently led her to a rather quieter part of the deck.

As the *Linnet* approached the lock at Crinan, the seaward end of the canal, the passengers gathered at the rail to catch their first sight of the Atlantic Ocean, and the distant islands which to many of them were home.

Margaret and Wee Annie were skipping in the school yard.

'. . . nineteen, twenty, twenty-one . . .' If she didn't stop soon, Margaret was going to run out of numbers. What came after twenty-nine?

Losing concentration, the little girl found her feet hopelessly tangled in the rope. Annie took it from her and with equal proficiency had soon reached twenty.

'Here they are, the Eisdalsa poisoners!'

Suddenly the girls were aware that a small crowd had gathered about them. Annie stopped skipping and groped instinctively for her friend's hand. As they backed up against the high stone wall, so the hostile group surrounding them, advanced.

'You gave my brother polluted water.' Rory McAllister spat the words at them menacingly. 'Now he has cholera. If he dies, you will be *murderers*!'

'We didn't give him cholera! We didn't!' Annie protested, but none of the crowd was going to listen to her denial. Had they not all seen her and Margaret Beaton, handing out the drinks by the old well?

'You gave our Tom well water,' insisted Rory, 'and now he's ill!'

'But it wasn't water from the well,' Margaret protested. 'It was . . .'

She was interrupted by the arrival of Flora Johnstone, breathless from her run from the ferry landing.

'Our Hector's got it,' she blurted out. 'My ma called out the doctor in the middle of the night!' She waited for the dramatic announcement to sink in. 'Blue in the face he was, and sick everywhere.'

'It's them.' Amy McPherson pointed a grubby finger at Annie and Margaret, almost poking the latter in the stomach. Margaret shrank back, feeling the rough edges of the sharp wall stones digging into her shoulders.

'You know it wasn't well water we used, Amy McPherson. You were there . . . you saw us carrying the jug!' Annie shouted at the silly creature, defiantly.

Amy McPherson was not a clever child. Generally she was the butt of her classmates' humour. For her, this was a rare treat, to be on the side of the tormentors.

'They got the water from the well,' she declared, now, warming to her story.

'We did not!' shouted Margaret. Even in the midst of her terror, she remembered the scene. 'Anyway, Simon Strachie drank some of the water too, and he's not sick.'

They all turned to where Simon Strachie, looking decidedly red-faced, was standing in the midst of the crowd. He was about to deny all knowledge of the affair when an exceptionally strong grip on his right arm caused him to turn around. Instantly he found that his arm was forced up behind him and a sharp pain made him cry out in anguish.

'You are not going to deny that you drank some of that water, are you, Simon?' Stuart Beaton snarled. 'Because my sister told me that you did. She was very upset that you took it too . . . since you weren't running in the race.'

The crowd had suddenly fallen silent.

Hugh Beaton pushed his way forward, astonished to see his little sister under attack. When Stuart explained what had been going on, he turned on the throng.

'Lots of us drank that water,' he told them. 'I did, so did Stuart, so did lots of you here. We're not sick. You don't know that either Hector or Tom McAllister drank it, and

even if they did, Annie says that the water was from her house!'

The argument might have continued had not Katherine Logie appeared at the door of the schoolhouse and rung the bell for the start of lessons.

The teacher finished calling the register. There were more absentees today. Tom McAllister was still very ill, but his mother seemed to think he was improving. Rory had been watched closely by his parents and by David Beaton, but showed no sign of any symptoms. After one day, his mother sent him back to school. Martha Irvine was another who had succumbed to the disease some days ago. It was interesting to note that her brother was still in school, apparently quite well.

It did not take the schoolmistress long to recognise the air of tension in her classroom. There were whisperings and scufflings towards the back. When these were challenged, a defiant silence permeated the room. It was an uncomfortable atmosphere, and most disquieting for Katherine.

In order to avoid further confrontation at dinner time, Annie and Margaret managed to get out amongst the first of the children. They scampered off to Wee Annie's house and ate their pieces sitting in the McGillivrays' kitchen, glancing out fearfully from time to time, to see if they had been observed by their classmates.

'Can you believe that Amy McPherson and Simon Strachie?' Annie demanded. 'They laughed at us for carrying the water from home, and still joined in with the others about the well water. Why would they do that?'

Margaret was very young, but she did have the experience of living in a large family.

'Simon was cross with you for telling him off,' she observed. 'He wanted to get his own back.'

'And stupid Amy just goes along with what everyone else is saying,' Annie concluded.

'There's the bell.' Margaret jumped at the sound. She was fearful of confronting her classmates once more, but it was

unthinkable that she should be late for lessons, still less play truant. Steeling herself for the confrontation, she made for the door.

'Come on, Annie,' she urged. 'Stuart and Hugh will see we come to no harm.'

With this comforting thought, Annie was persuaded to follow.

The afternoon was hot and the minute hand on the huge Parliament clock above the blackboard seemed to have gone into reverse, so slowly did it move.

There was a giggle, unmistakably that of Amy McPherson. Katherine raised her head from the work she was marking.

'What is it, Amy? Can you not get on with the exercise?'

'Yes, miss!' Amy lowered her eyes to her desk, but there was an unmistakable shake of the shoulders as she suppressed her laughter.

Katherine chose to ignore the episode; it was too hot for conflict, and it would soon be time for classes to end. She returned to her marking, and therefore did not see the note that slipped from hand to hand along one row, and then forward to where Margaret and Annie shared a desk.

The grubby piece of paper landed in front of Annie. Glancing up to see if she was observed, the little girl gingerly unfolded it.

Although whoever had drawn it was no artist, the intention was clear enough. The picture depicted a mug of water with worm-like creatures swimming in it. Beside it was drawn a horizontal figure, labelled TOM.

Margaret gasped when she saw the picture. Katherine looked up and said sharply, 'Margaret Beaton, bring that to me at once!'

Reluctantly, the little girl placed the missive on the teacher's desk. It was bad enough to receive the nasty thing, let alone be punished for looking at it.

The perpetrators were enjoying the child's predicament. Margaret was recognised as 'Teacher's Pet'. To see her in this situation was very satisfying.

Katherine appeared mystified by the drawing. The close atmosphere had made her irritable and unreasonable.

'I shall require an explanation,' she said harshly. 'You know that it is forbidden to pass any communication in class.'

'But I didn't . . .' Margaret began to protest.

'Stand by the blackboard, Margaret Beaton. Turn your face to the wall. I shall deal with this when the class has been dismissed.'

The next ten minutes seemed endless to Margaret as she stood, trembling with anxiety, at the front of the room. At last it was time for prayers. Chairs were pulled back, the children filed out in an orderly fashion, and suddenly a thick, heavy silence descended.

Miss Logie continued with her marking for a few minutes; the scratching of her pen set Margaret's teeth on edge.

'Now, child,' the schoolmistress demanded, 'come here and tell me what this is all about.'

The humiliation of her treatment, and the frustration of being misunderstood, together with the long stand in the heat of the afternoon, finally proved too much for Margaret. She gave a huge sob. Tears poured down her face. She had lost her handkerchief and her nose was running.

Katherine's heart melted at the sight.

'Oh, dear,' she said. 'It really can't be as bad as that, Margaret. Here, take this.' She took from her reticule a small square of white lawn edged with delicate lace. Even in her dire distress, Margaret could not help noticing the beautiful handkerchief. She hesitated to blow her nose on it.

'Here, let me mop you up.' Gently, Katherine calmed the distraught child, and from amid the hiccoughs and the sobs, managed to extract the bones of the story.

'But,' she protested, when Margaret had finished, 'if you were pouring the drinks from Mrs McGillivray's jug, why should Rory and the others think that the water came from the well?'

'We used the top of the well as a table,' Margaret explained. Then, as if remembering for the first time, she

added, 'Anyway, Tom McAllister didn't drink any of our water, and he's ill, and my brothers both did, and they're not!'

Katherine looked up at that moment to see Wee Annie McGillivray standing shyly in the doorway.

'Come here, Annie,' she called. 'Margaret has told me all about the accusations made by your classmates. I am quite sure that they are unfounded. In fact, I think you should have received some thanks for thinking to provide the runners with refreshment.'

'Now,' she continued, 'I shall accompany Margaret home. I need to talk to Dr Beaton.' Then, seeing Margaret's look of alarm, 'Only to ask the real cause of the cholera,' she added hastily.

When Annabel caught sight of Margaret being escorted home by Miss Logie, her thoughts flew immediately to the cholera. Was the child sick? She did not look too dejected. Why then? Had she had an accident? It was unthinkable that she had been so naughty that her teacher should accompany her home to complain!

She went to meet them as they turned on to the path from the shore.

As they drew near, Katherine called out, 'I do hope that this is not an inconvenient time, Mrs Beaton. I had hoped to have a word with the doctor.'

With obvious relief, Annabel greeted her unexpected guest and after inviting her to take tea on the terrace, turned to her little daughter.

'Margaret, run and ask your father to join us, that's a good girl.'

Margaret sped away down the dark passage which led to her father's domain. Since the cholera epidemic the children had been warned against going into the surgery for any reason whatsoever. When she reached the heavy oak door, Margaret tapped, at first timidly, and then, receiving no response, very much louder.

'All right, all right, no need to knock the door down!' David's voice sounded irritable, as though he might have been wakened from a deep sleep.

As the heavy footsteps approached the door, Margaret stepped back into the gloom of the passage, fearing his irascibility.

'Why, Margaret, home from school already?' was all he said. 'I must have dropped off for a moment.' He yawned, stretched his arms wide, and had advanced towards her, for his customary hug, when he remembered that he had not washed properly since visiting his patients earlier. He drew back.

To the child, it seemed that the rejection was in some way connected with herself, and tears filled her eyes.

'What is it, kitten?' he enquired, realising that for some reason his attitude had distressed his little daughter. 'You know that I don't like you to come in here while the cholera is about. It is only to protect you from the disease . . . you do understand, don't you?'

She nodded her head silently, gulping back the tears.

'What is it you want then?' he asked, not unkindly.

'Miss Logie is on the terrace with Mama. She wants to speak to you.'

'Oh, I see. Not been getting up to any mischief, have you?' Whatever it was, it could not be as serious as his little girl seemed to think. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he made to close the door again.

'Tell Mama that I will have a good wash and change my clothes before joining her. Run along now, and see if Sheilagh can do something about your dirty face . . . you look like a little gipsy!'

'. . . so you see, the children, particularly the islanders, seem to have been blaming Annie and Margaret for their friends having cholera.' Katherine tried to describe the incidents in the school that day, as related to her by Margaret.

'Margaret and Annie assure me,' she continued, 'that the water they gave out came from the McGillivrays' house,

and had been boiled that morning. However, because they were serving it, using the top of the well as a table, the runners naturally imagined that the water came from there. But, as I said to Mrs McGillivray, everyone was drinking that water until last week, when Mr Whylie condemned the wells for drinking purposes.'

David did not respond immediately. He was considering what Katherine had told him.

'I hope you do not think me to be overreacting to childish notions, Dr Beaton?' Katherine continued anxiously. 'The two little girls are so very distressed at the suggestion that they might have some responsibility for spreading the disease . . . and, of course, they are suffering at the hands of the others. Children can be so very cruel to each other, even if the attacks are only verbal.'

David could contain his excitement no longer.

'You said that everyone was drinking well water until last week, Miss Logie. What alternative source of supply has been found?'

'There was a communication to all households, from Mr Whylie. It suggested that the brackish water from the wells was possibly unsafe, and that in future everyone should use water carried over from Seileach, for drinking and cooking. We are also obliged to boil any water that we drink.'

Wrapped up as he was in his own concerns, David had had no direct contact with William Whylie since the epidemic had begun. He recalled discussing the possibility of piping water from Seileach to Eisdalsa Island, of course, but this was a long-term measure. William had obviously decided the time had come for direct action . . . if he was collecting water from the mainland, what supply was being used?

'I am most obliged to you, Miss Logie, for drawing my attention to a problem which might, in fact, help us solve the mystery of the source of the cholera bacteria.'

'You don't think the girls were in any way responsible for the disease breaking out on the island, do you, Doctor?'

'On the contrary, Miss Logie. Even if they had used the well, which you assure me they did not, I am quite convinced that the well water is the safest source of supply on the island!'

Mystified by her father's words, Margaret looked to her mother for reassurance. Annabel hugged her tight and waited for David to explain.

'The disease did not break out on the island until the beginning of this week,' he stated. 'Now, on what day did Mr Whylie's men begin carrying water across from Seileach?'

'It must have been last Wednesday. Yes, that was it, it was the day when the children had their race.'

'Barrels were left in various places,' she continued. 'One was put on the steps of the schoolhouse, next to the rainwater barrel . . . the one the children usually . . . drink . . . from.' Katherine's voice trailed off as a picture formed in her mind of children gathered around that barrel, dipping into it to cool themselves after the run.

'That barrel . . .' She hesitated. 'Some of the children took unboiled water from it . . . I had quite forgotten. I scolded them for not waiting until they were inside, where I had a supply of boiled water ready for them!'

'Did Tom McAllister drink that water?' David asked. Tom had been the first, and one of the most severely affected of the children.

'He won the race,' said Katherine, 'but it was your Stuart who came into the schoolroom first. I remember him being on his own for quite a few minutes. I don't know if Tom drank from the barrel.'

'Never mind, Miss Logie, you have been very helpful,' David assured her.

A chorus of young voices heralded the arrival of the remaining members of the Beaton household. As Hugh and Stuart approached Tigh na Broch, they were welcomed ecstatically by two boisterous retriever dogs and the youngest of the Beaton boys, three-year-old Ian.

Annabel got up to go and quiet the racket. As she stepped on to the grass, David called to her, 'Ask Hugh to come

here, will you, Annabel? I shall have to send him back to Eisdalsa, with a note for William.'

'It is time I was going, Dr Beaton.' Katherine gathered her hat and gloves. 'I am sure you have a great many matters to attend to.'

'Thank you for the trouble you have taken, Miss Logie.' David rose to his feet. 'If you will wait a few moments, I will have Angus rig the pony-trap and convey you to the ferry.'

'There is really no need, thank you, Doctor,' she responded. 'It is much cooler now. I shall enjoy the walk.'

'At least allow young Hugh to escort you,' he protested. 'It will take no more than a moment for me to write a note to Mr Whylie. I must discuss this matter of the water with him, without delay.'

Chapter 3

'There, William, do you see those dark globules with a bit of a tail?'

David stood back so that his friend could focus the microscope for himself.

The bright field, seen through the high-powered lens of the instrument, seemed at first to resemble nothing more than a junk yard. It was a jumble of small and large, dense and nearly transparent scraps, without any definite shape that William could discern.

'Where?' he asked. 'I cannot tell one item from another.'

'Oh, here, let me look.' David pushed his friend aside none too gently in his excitement.

'Here's one . . . see, in the upper right quadrant . . . very distinctive.' He moved aside again to allow William to see.

Whylie sat down and fixed his eye carefully as David had directed . . . yes, sure enough, there was something there . . . almost black . . . a dense round body with what looked like a tiny tail . . . Yes, it did appear just like a comma!

'Can so minute an object really cause such devastation?' he asked, incredulous.

'One alone does little harm,' David expounded. 'Unfortunately, each microbe reproduces itself every twenty minutes or thereabouts. A mathematician like yourself will have no difficulty in assessing the number of such organisms which will be present after, say, three days!' He lifted down a small box which held neat rows of glass slides.

'Look at this . . . a sample of blood taken from the schoolmaster, Ogilvie, when he was near to complete collapse.'

David replaced the sample of water from the barrel

outside the Eisdalsa Island school with another slide from his collection.

Now, with a better idea what to look for, William had no difficulty in identifying the cholera microbes. What astonished him was the number of bacteria in this sample.

'*Vibrio cholerae*,' David told him. 'Each one manufacturing a small quantity of toxic substances. Collectively, they can produce sufficient poison to kill a grown man!'

'But not everyone dies,' William protested. 'You have yourself declared many of your patients to be past the crisis.'

'We have the means to neutralise the effects of the toxins which are produced by the bacteria, and so we can arrest the loss of fluids. If a person is young and strong, there is a good chance that the body's natural defences will eventually put paid to the bacterium. But sometimes . . . you will recall what happened to Annabel some years back . . . sometimes the germ lies dormant in the blood, and then suddenly begins to multiply again, bringing on a second and often even more devastating bout of fever.'

'So even some of your recovered patients may still be carrying the disease?' William was beginning to understand David's concern. Even when the present epidemic was brought under control, there would be no end to the outbreaks, until the removal and disposal of human waste was properly organised.

'It is essential,' declared David, 'that we find the source of the disease. There is one vital clue . . . the barrels carried over to the island. Where did your men find the water to fill them?'

'You believe the barrels to be responsible for the outbreak on the island then?' William, remembering the state of the midden at the head of Eisdalsa harbour, was unable to suppress his scepticism.

'There was no sign of the disease on the island until the barrels were provided,' David assured him. 'I have taken samples from the Eisdalsa wells. Certainly the water contains more salts than are desirable, but there is no sign of *Vibrio cholerae*.'

'So,' mused William, 'if we knew where the men filled the barrels, we could trace the source of the disease?'

'Precisely!' David replied impatiently. 'So tell me, where did the water come from?'

'I have no idea,' replied William. 'I simply gave orders for the men to collect it. I presumed that they would use one of the burns running down from the Robber's Tower.'

Caisteal an Spuilleadair was the two-hundred-foot high volcanic plug which overshadowed the village, providing shelter from harsh north-westerly gales. Made of tough, dolerite rock, it presented a rugged outline, the softer sediments into which it had intruded having mainly been eroded away. Here and there, basin-shaped corries gave rise to a number of lochans, or small lakes, kept filled in normal years by the regular rainfall.

On the west-facing cliff, one of these lochans overflowed into a number of small streams, which tumbled down the steep hillside into the village, ensuring sufficient clean, fresh water for the entire population.

'Has anyone been up to see how the level is in the lochan?' David enquired. 'It is possible that a reduction in water-flow has allowed the disease to flourish.'

'I was up there myself a week ago.' William recalled the short cut he had taken across the hills to Ballachuan, to visit the old Major. He had gathered marsh marigolds from beside the lochan on his return journey.

'There was more muddy bank exposed than usual, certainly, but plenty of water remained,' he continued. 'The sheep have made a great disturbance of the bank, it's true, but that mud would have settled again before running into the burn.'

David considered William's report. 'In any case,' he responded thoughtfully, 'sheep would not be responsible for cholera . . . no, there must be a human source of contamination.'

'I will speak to Archie McLean,' William assured him. 'He will be able to tell me where those barrels were filled.'

'Dinner will soon be served.' Annabel bustled into the room, closely followed by her mother-in-law, Morag Beaton. 'Why, William, how good it is to see you. We have had so few

visitors since this wretched cholera broke out.'

'An epidemic is not a situation to encourage social intercourse,' observed Morag as she, too, acknowledged William's polite greeting. 'I suppose you gentlemen have been reconstructing the universe in our absence!'

'Hardly that, Mama!' David laughed. 'But we have been examining some possibilities for improving the water supply.' Tired after a long day with his patients, he had suddenly realised how hungry he was. 'Did you not come to tell us the meal was ready, Annabel?'

'Oh, yes, of course . . . do come this way, William.' She led the small party into the dining-room.

In the main bedroom overhead Stuart had been peering through the wee round gap between the floorboards. Long ago the boys had discovered this spy-hole, and when there was a visitor they made a point of eavesdropping. Usually, conversation was confined to dull old stuff about committees and elections, the price of meal and the state of the crofters . . . nothing really exciting. Recently, in fact, Hugh had lost interest in this spying game, and had left his brother in sole possession of the peephole.

This pleased Stuart more than he could say. A visit from Uncle William was sure to yield some intriguing information.

Stuart had found the discussion about cholera rather tedious and had been about to give up when his father had mentioned the wáter barrels.

Stuart knew about those barrels.

He had been hiding in the heather, on the hill above the schoolhouse, waiting for his classmates to march in crocodile down to the ferry . . . to join Miss Logie's class on the island.

The McAllisters had promised to bring their fishing boat across to pick him up as soon as the other children were safely settled in the schoolroom. As Stuart crouched on the hillside, waiting for a sight of his fellow truants, he had watched the wagon being loaded with barrels of water from the stream

beside the schoolhouse. He had heard the laden cart roll off down to the pier, with Archie McLean chivvying the men. They were out of sight by the time that Tom's small craft had grounded on the shingle, below the schoolmaster's house.

Stuart stretched his cramped limbs, and started towards the door. The information he had was important, he realised that. He should tell his father and Uncle William right away.

With his hand on the doorknob, he hesitated. If he told what he knew, there would be questions. How had he seen the barrels being loaded when he should have been in school on the island? He had been fortunate to escape interrogation after Angus had collected him on the Monday, when Ogilvie was taken ill. How could he have known that classes would be cancelled for the afternoon?

Thankfully, his father had been too busy with his patient on that occasion, and his mother too obsessed with her cleaning operation, to bother with explanations from him.

What was he to do now?

Slipping quietly out of his parents' bedroom, Stuart sped up the narrow staircase to the room under the eaves, which he shared with his brother.

'Hugh, Hugh, are you awake?' he called softly.

Hugh, having slipped into that first profound slumber of the young and healthy, was not pleased to be disturbed.

'What . . . what do you want? What's happened?' he grumbled, turning over and blinking at the oil-lamp which Stuart had turned up to its full brightness.

Stuart explained.

'What did you wake me up for?' Hugh remonstrated. 'You know what you have to do. Just go downstairs and tell Papa what you saw.'

'But, if I do, I will be in trouble for missing school.'

'That's not so important as letting Papa know where the polluted water came from. It's your duty to tell!'

'I can't, I shall get a beating for going fishing with Tom . . . you know I will.'

It was true that Stuart had been expressly forbidden to go

in the McAllisters' boat, even on an authorised holiday, but to admit to having missed school, would mean certain chastisement. Annabel was terrified that her child might get into danger in the treacherous waters while David was unhappy at the close association which his younger boy seemed to be forming with the quarryman's two sons. He considered that Stuart was being unduly influenced by the McAllisters, appearing to find fishing and sailing far more absorbing than study.

'You'll have to tell anyway,' Hugh insisted. He understood the very serious nature of the disease which had been visited upon them. Anything which might help to hasten its departure must be investigated at once.

'You have to say something,' he stressed.

'Can't you go and tell Papa for me?' pleaded Stuart.

'You know that he is never cross with you for long,' Hugh told him. 'If I go, he will give me a clip round the ear for interrupting them, without even listening to what I have to say!'

From infancy, Hugh had sensed David's indifference towards him. He sometimes felt himself to be an intrusion on David's life. His mother made no secret of the fact that she favoured her 'Golden Boy', as she had taken to calling baby Stuart, once his proper hair had begun to grow. Only Morag was prepared to give Hugh her undivided attention. It was to his grandmother that he always turned in moments of distress. She was his champion in all things.

'I'll see if I can attract Grandmother's attention,' he conceded. 'I will tell her about the water and perhaps she will pass on your information.'

'Uncle William will be able to talk to McLean in the morning . . . in another few hours they will know about it anyway.' Stuart was beginning to wish he had said nothing about the stupid water.

'It may be too important to wait until morning,' Hugh pointed out. 'You stay here. I will go and have a word with Sheilagh.'

* * *

Sheilagh was standing on the back step, trying to catch a breath of evening air. Now in her seventieth year, the motherly woman had served three generations of Beatons. Her simple wisdom had done much to keep things on an even keel in a household where strong wills and great external pressures did so much to disrupt harmony.

There had been problems in the early days of David's marriage to Annabel. After the birth of her first child, the young bride had suffered a severe depression. During this time, she had distanced herself from her baby. Sheilagh had been his nursemaid and Morag his surrogate mother. Even after all these years, it was to Morag and Sheilagh that he naturally turned for understanding and sympathy.

'Sheilagh, are they nearly finished dinner?' he asked, catching sight of her through the glass panel of the kitchen door.

'Mercy me, Master Hugh,' she cried, catching at her breast in mock surprise, 'what are you doing out of your bed so late?'

'I have to talk to Grandmother, Sheilagh. It really is tremendously important. Will you fetch her . . . please!'

'I am about to take in their pudding,' replied the servant. 'Can you no' wait until they are all finished?'

'Not really,' he implored her. 'Uncle William may leave before he hears what I have to say. It really is very, very urgent, Sheilagh.'

Unlike his brother, Hugh was not given to exaggeration when it came to this kind of request. If he said the matter was serious, Sheilagh was ready to believe him.

'What is it you want me to do then, Master Hugh?' she queried, moving into the hot kitchen and wiping her clammy hands on her crumpled apron.

'Make some excuse to get Grandmother out here. Please, Sheilagh!'

'Oh, very well, I will see what I can do.'

In the dining room the conversation had turned to women in medicine. Annabel related the news that Kirsty McGillivray

was expected home, and suggested to David that she might be invited to lend him her assistance.

'I have no intention of exposing any young woman to this disease unnecessarily,' he declared. 'It is enough that I must ask the women of the affected households to do the nursing. There is no need for any additional person to be endangered.'

'Major Lovat sent word that he will be calling upon you tomorrow.' Morag suddenly recalled a message left at the surgery that morning. 'I believe he, too, is offering his services in the emergency.'

'There you are, you see.' David turned to Annabel. 'If there is any need for an assistant, I have my dear old friend to help me!'

'The way things are turning out,' observed William quietly, 'it might be wise to enlist Miss McGillivray's help.' The engineer exchanged a faint smile with Annabel. They were both aware of David's extreme reluctance to concede that Kirsty's two years of medical training could be of any value to him.

Sheilagh's entrance at that moment proved most timely. Addressing Morag, she described a minor disaster in the kitchen, concerning the pudding.

'I have had a little accident, madam,' she claimed. 'I think you should come and advise me what to do about it.'

Annabel looked up, suspicious. Sheilagh would be the last person to ask advice about such a matter. She was a master of disguise when it came to culinary misfortunes.

Morag, too, was surprised, but seeing the intensity of the entreaty behind the woman's gaze, rose to her feet without further question and excused herself.

The men were too intent upon their own conversation to notice anything odd about Sheilagh's request.

In the kitchen, Hugh greeted his grandmother's appearance with great relief. In a few words, he conveyed the information about the water carriers, avoiding any mention of Stuart's part in the matter.

Sheilagh, meanwhile, set about shattering the cleanly moulded pudding, which was waiting to be carried in to the diners. Then, painstakingly, she began to reconstruct it as best she could.

Morag was puzzled at Hugh's demand for secrecy. 'If you think it important that your father should know where the water was taken from, why do you not just go straight in and tell him?'

'To do that would be to suggest that I had listened to his conversation with Uncle William,' Hugh demurred.

'And did you?' his grandmother asked, the twinkle in her eyes hinting that she had an idea how the boy might have overheard his father's discussion with William Whylie. Hugh's was not the first generation to discover that knot-hole in the floorboards of the master bedroom.

'Well, no, I didn't actually . . .' He hesitated.

'Stuart then?' Yes, that was it, she realised. Stuart, playing a silly game, had listened to the men talking, and knew something which they should be told . . . but was afraid to confess his own misbehaviour.

'Well,' Morag said, 'if there is something important that your father should know, you had better tell me, and I will find some rather less painful way of passing it on to him!'

'Oh, thank you, Grandmama!' Hugh, the weight of responsibility lifted from him, threw his arms around Morag's neck and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

'I must get back to the dining-room or your mother will be coming to find out what is happening,' Morag cautioned. 'What is the message for your father?'

'The water which Mr McLean's men collected for the island came from the burn below the schoolhouse.' Hugh sighed with relief, his part in the operation completed.

'Is that it?' Morag was mystified. 'Is that what all this fuss has been about?'

'I think you will find that Papa will not treat it as a trivial matter,' he assured her. 'He needs to know the source of that water because it is contaminated with the cholera germs.'

'Off to bed with you now, you young rascal.' His grandmother kissed the boy lightly on the forehead. 'Tell Stuart I will convey his message, but I wish he'd had the courage to carry it himself.'

'Just a minor disaster,' Morag announced, as she bustled back into the room. Sheilagh followed, carrying the mutilated pudding.

Seeing the untidy mould, William laughed. 'That is how all my concoctions turn out,' he declared, instantly putting his hostess at her ease.

'Don't tell me that you do your own cooking these days, William?' Annabel was genuinely surprised.

'Mrs McLean has been an excellent instructor,' he assured her. 'I am often obliged to fend for myself just now. Maggie has so much to do. Several of her daughter's family are down with the cholera.'

'I had not realised there were any cases of cholera on the island,' observed Morag. 'What is the cause, do you think, David?'

Reluctant to discuss the epidemic while eating, his reply was brusque. 'The germs seem to have arrived on the island by way of water carried over from Seileach.'

'Oh,' observed Morag innocently, 'was that what McLean and his friends were doing last Tuesday morning, down by the schoolhouse burn?'

Both William and David put down their spoons and stared at her.

William was the first to speak. 'Did you see them, Mrs Beaton?'

'No, but I heard it mentioned that they were there,' she answered evasively.

'You know, William,' David burst out excitedly, 'it makes sense. Ogilvie was the first to succumb to the disease. What if the source of infection is within the school itself? I had rather assumed that the schoolmaster had taken food or drink from one of the houses in the village, but of course . . . some of

the householders at this end might gather their water from that burn as well. I think we should go and take a look around.'

Both men jumped to their feet.

'Surely you will not go out now?' Annabel protested. 'Why, it is past ten o'clock!'

'Still bright daylight though,' William observed. It was only a week or two past the Summer solstice, and it did not grow dark until nearly midnight.

The burn was very quiet tonight. Normally, a torrent of white water passed beneath this narrow bridge, before fanning out across the shingle and emptying into the ocean.

The two men stood for a few moments, gazing down into the shallow stream.

'The schoolmaster's house, as well as the school itself, must obtain water from this burn,' William observed. It was customary for a house, or a group of houses, to receive water piped from the bed of a fast-flowing stream or from a clean pool, usually at some height above the village, to a reservoir below ground and close by the dwellings. A hand pump served to bring the water up when required.

As David and William had approached the school, they were obliged to pass by just such a pump. When William had tried to obtain some water, however, all he managed to achieve was a sucking noise, and a drop or two of brownish, unwholesome-looking liquid.

'Where is the schoolhouse supply taken from the burn?' asked William.

'I remember that, as boys, we would sometimes climb up the hill behind the schoolmaster's house, following the burn,' David replied. 'There was a fine pool up there which could be the reservoir.' He pointed out a small spinney of gnarled willows, tucked into the cliff, some two hundred feet above their heads.

William followed his gaze. At the spot that David had described, a group of sheep, their shaggy coats pink in

the glow of the setting sun, had gathered. It was a clear indication that there was water nearby.

Fortunately both men were wearing stout boots. Climbing down into the burn, they paddled along the bed of the stream.

Near the schoolmaster's house they noticed a narrow gully opening into the stream, a few inches above the water level. The surrounding area was covered in green slime and smelt abominably.

'The outfall from the cesspit,' William decided.

Continuing along the stream, they were soon well above the house. Now they had to climb, levering themselves from boulder to boulder up what was usually a spectacular waterfall.

At the top of the waterfall, the ground flattened out. William saw the pool which David had described. A small, bowl-shaped depression in the ground collected water from a dozen or more minor streams. A colony of watercress plants and lush growths of pondweed bore witness to the purity of the water.

The water-level in this pool was much lower than usual. The marginal plants, normally flowering at this time of the year, had withered and died.

It did not take the men long to find the outlet pipe serving the schoolmaster's premises. It was now well above the water-line. A second, similar pipe was discovered, presumably carrying water to the cottages.

Midges were becoming tiresome. The two men lit their pipes in an attempt to dispel the pests.

William perched on a rock and puffed away thoughtfully for a few minutes.

'There is no water reaching the schoolhouse through that pipe,' he mused. 'So where have they been taking their water from?'

'One would hope,' said David, 'that the servants would be climbing up here, to collect their supplies in buckets.'

'There is no evidence of human footprints anywhere,' William observed.

'It is my belief,' David declared, 'that the entire problem can be placed at the door of that effluent channel beside the schoolmaster's house. Remember, the cholera germ can only be transmitted in human faeces. If the folks from the cottages along the road, McLean's people and also those in the schoolhouse, have been taking water from below where that effluent channel empties into the burn, then it is easy to see how the disease is being spread.'

'I am sure you are right,' William agreed, 'but if everyone in the schoolmaster's household has been drinking water taken from the stream, why is it that only Ogilvie himself has been affected?'

'I shall have to make further enquiries at the house,' David replied.

'Well, in the meantime, I will see to it that no more water is taken from this burn,' promised William, 'and we will have to reinforce the instructions to keep on boiling all the water from other sources.'

David was not confident that they had covered every aspect.

'If similar circumstances exist in other parts of the village,' he speculated, 'it would explain why we are now beginning to see further outbreaks, not associated with this source.'

'The whole system must be closed down completely,' William decided. 'I will organise a regular water collection from the lochan on the Ballachuan road. We will have to persuade everyone to take extra precautions with their sanitation until more satisfactory arrangements can be made.'

David was sceptical.

'The trouble is,' he complained, 'that people are eager enough to heed my instructions when their loved ones are sick, but they become careless when things begin to improve. If only one could teach them about the origins of the problem, and the way to prevent the disease affecting them in the first place . . .'

'Why not do that?' William suggested. 'Teach them, I mean. Hold classes such as Elizabeth arranges for the men . . . but these could be for the women.'

'But I have no time for such things, not with the epidemic raging,' David protested.

'Annabel knows enough about the disease, and Mrs McGillivray is a very sensible woman. Surely, between them, the ladies could achieve your purpose?'

David could not deny the logic of his friend's argument. He decided to discuss the matter with Annabel in the morning.

The light had almost gone from the western sky. Fearing they might miss their footing in the treacherous stream bed, and reluctant to disturb the schoolmaster's household, David and William continued the short climb to the top of the cliff by way of a well-marked sheep track then made their way back to Tigh na Broch, where William was grateful for the offer of a bed for the few hours remaining before dawn.

By the time David had seated himself at the breakfast table the following morning, the children had already been packed off to school. They had been delighted to be accompanied by William, who was anxious to get his plans for water collection underway and could not wait for his host to appear.

'I am glad we have this time to ourselves,' David told Annabel. 'I have a medical matter of some importance to discuss with you. What would you say to setting up some classes for the women, to try to encourage them to think beyond the actual sickroom?'

'I am not sure if I completely understand you. Are you suggesting that I become a teacher? I do not know if I can speak in public. I have never had the opportunity to find out.'

'Would you try? If I were to coach you in the ideas which we have to get across?' David persuaded. 'I believe that the women would listen to you more readily than to me. They would accept that you are on their own intellectual level, and therefore better able to communicate with them.'

Annabel felt that her husband might have put his argument more subtly. She was, however, so astonished at his faith in her ability to carry out this task, that she was not going to quibble about his attitude.

'I will do my best,' she assured him. 'If you will provide the information for me to impart.'

'Splendid!' David, pleased to have had so little trouble enlisting Annabel's help, wasted no time in passing over to her the various references which he had gathered on the causes of infectious diseases and the methods of their control.

'If you will begin by reading the passages I have marked,' he explained, 'I will have a word with Elizabeth about arranging a time. With luck we will be able to use the Drill Hall since William supports the idea of these training classes for the women.'

Any further discussion was brought to a halt by the announcement of a visitor for Dr Beaton.

'Miss Kirsty McGillivray is here to see you, Doctor,' Sheilagh announced.

'Miss McGillivray? Surely she must be here to see Mrs Beaton? Show her into the drawing-room, Sheilagh,' David corrected her. 'Unless, of course, she is here as a patient?'

'Oh, no, sir,' the servant insisted. 'Miss McGillivray specifically asked to speak to you, Doctor . . . on a matter of business, she said.'

'Oh, very well.' Half expecting this visit and not relishing the encounter, David was forced to give in. 'Show her into my study. I will join her there directly.'

Kirsty looked about the room, admiring the stacked bookshelves, the heavily carved furniture, the fine Turkish rug. She had a vague recollection of being brought to Tigh na Broch as a child, to the surgery which must adjoin this room, but she had never realised that a library such as this could exist anywhere outside the city.

It was seldom that quarry workers and their families could afford a visit to the doctor. There must have been a good reason for her mother to bring her. Perhaps it had been something to do with her father's accident. There had been a great deal of fuss over his injuries. The Company had been anxious

to avoid paying compensation while William Whylie was equally determined to ensure that James McGillivray should be given all the medicines and care which he required.

Yes, that must have been it, for Kirsty could not remember having had a day's illness herself in all her life.

There was the sound of a door being opened; into the surgery, she imagined. A moment later there was a sharp knocking on the study door. Not quite knowing what she should do, she opened it cautiously.

'Why, I do believe that it's the little McGillivray girl, all grown up!' exclaimed the elderly gentleman who stood before her, his grey eyes sparkling with pleasure at the unexpected encounter. 'Here am I, come to offer my services to the good doctor, and what do I find . . . he has already availed himself of the next generation of medics!'

Major Lovat had figured largely in Kirsty's preparations for medical training.

Elizabeth, when at last she had been persuaded to take up a normal existence again, had settled quickly into her task of running the Mechanics Institute on the island. While this was largely intended for quarrymen, others past official school age, and seeking some kind of further education, were also included. For Kirsty, bent on becoming a doctor, Elizabeth had devised a course of study to bring her up to a standard acceptable for entrance to a medical training. With David so antagonistic to the idea of encouraging the girl, she had approached Major Lovat to provide instruction in anatomy, physiology and natural sciences. Lovat had put all his energies into coaching her, and had been overjoyed when Kirsty was accepted as a medical student.

'It is a great pleasure to see you, my dear,' he declared, taking her hand in courtly fashion and kissing it. 'I did not think that the University year ended so soon.'

'It does not,' she assured him. 'But when I explained that there was an epidemic here, my tutor agreed that I might come home early to give what help I could. Dr Beaton must have a great deal of work on his hands.'

'That is precisely why I am here myself,' Lovat confided. 'But where is Beaton?'

'Here!' Neither of them had heard David come into the room.

'David, my boy, you are looking as though you could do with a good night's sleep,' observed the Major. 'My little companion here and I are determined to see that you get it!'

'That is very good of you, sir,' David welcomed his old friend. 'I must admit that it is a considerable burden for one pair of hands.'

He turned now to his other visitor.

'Miss McGillivray,' he addressed her somewhat frostily, 'I believe you wished to have a word with me. Is it a private matter? Should we perhaps adjourn to the surgery?'

'Oh, no,' declared Kirsty. 'I wished only to give you this letter from my tutor, Mr Patterson, with whom I believe you are acquainted. Should you agree with his assessment, I would be very pleased to give you all the assistance that I can.'

David gave the girl a penetrating look before taking the paper she held out to him. He read the letter through carefully. Then, in the silence which had fallen on the room, he read it again. Finally, he placed the letter on the desk and walked over to the window.

'You appear to have made quite an impression upon Mr Patterson,' he murmured, indicating to Lovat that he too should read the note.

Major Lovat picked up the letter and read it himself. 'Well,' he cried, 'what better recommendation could you have than that, my dear? Now then, Beaton, no more time to waste. Just allocate us to our sections of the parish, and we will be about our business.'

'What?' David looked up, startled. 'Allocate . . . oh, I see. Well, Major, if you will concentrate on the cottages at this end of the village, I will attend to some new patients I have to visit down near the harbour. I shall cross over to the island this afternoon. Since we have now located

the source of contaminated water, we should not have too many additional cases over there.

'My wife is preparing to lecture the women on the need to prevent further spread of the disease. Hopefully we shall have this thing under control in a short while.'

Kirsty had waited patiently for her assignment. David appeared to have completely forgotten her offer of help. She glanced appealingly towards the Major.

'What about Miss McGillivray then, Beaton? Where is she to begin?' he prompted.

'Miss McGillivray? Oh, yes . . . perhaps you will be kind enough to have a word with my wife, madam. You may be able to help her with this little preventative measure she is engaged upon. Come, Lovat, I have everything you require through here.' He led Major Lovat into his surgery and closed the door, very firmly, on the bewildered young lady.

Once the two men were alone, the Major rounded on David.

'Look here, Beaton, I think you are being most unreasonable. What harm is there in allowing the young woman to work with us? Patterson is obviously very taken with her ability. He says her knowledge is well in advance of other students in her year. The treatment required is pretty routine, after all, and she has us to consult when in difficulty.'

'Have you thought about what you are suggesting, Lovat?' David retorted irritably. 'Can you imagine the reaction if that young woman were to present herself, in the guise of a physician, at any house in the village? Good God, man! She grew up here, some of my patients no doubt dandled her on their knees not so many years ago. Can you see them now, allowing that little chit to attend them in their beds!'

They were interrupted by a loud hammering on the outer door. There was a muffled exchange, and then Morag stepped into the surgery.

'It is wee Robbie McGreggor, David, from the inn. He says his father has been ill all night and his mother has just now collapsed. The poor laddie is quite distraught!'

From elsewhere in the house, Annabel's voice was heard, calling out. There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs, then she burst into the study. Seeing Kirsty, alone, she enquired after her husband. The younger girl, still shocked by the reception David had given her, merely waved a hand in the direction of the surgery.

'David,' Annabel cried, flinging back the door, 'your signal is up on the masthead . . . there must be severe trouble on the island. William assured me that they would only call you if the matter was urgent.'

'Well,' observed the elderly surgeon calmly, 'it seems that you must either be in three places at once, Beaton, or take up Miss McGillivray's offer.'

David looked from William to Kirsty who now stood in the doorway watching him. Finally, he made up his mind.

'If you will be so kind as to check on the condition of those patients that I have already seen, Miss McGillivray, perhaps the Major can attend to the family at the inn. I myself will go and see what is amiss on the island.'

Chapter 4

William paced the length of the gallery, above the Great Hall, indignant at being kept waiting. He was not pleased to be summoned to Creag Castle at such a time. His workforce had been greatly depleted by the epidemic, and the necessity of having to deploy men for duties connected with scavenging and water carrying meant that he was hard pressed to maintain even a semblance of an output from the quarries. But: 'On the orders of His Lordship, the Marquis of Stirling', Lugas the Factor's letter had informed him. Even William could not disobey such a command, no matter how imperative his reasons.

When, at last, he was shown into the Factor's study, he was surprised to find that Alexander Lugas was not alone.

'Ah, Whylie,' Lugas greeted him, in friendly fashion. 'You will know Mr Murdo Campbell, I think?'

'We have met,' William replied. 'Good day to you, Mr Campbell,' he added, endeavouring to be civil. The other nodded curtly.

'You will know, of course,' Lugas declared, 'that Mr Campbell has leased quarrying rights from His Lordship on the island of Lunga.'

'Mr Campbell has so informed me,' William conceded.

'Well,' Lugas continued, 'it seems that, despite considerable efforts to recruit people for the work, Mr Campbell has found no one of suitable experience to act as foreman. He also requires a nucleus of skilled operators to teach the others.'

'So I understand,' said William warily, suddenly suspicious of Lugas's intentions.

'His Lordship is naturally anxious that the new enterprise shall succeed,' the Factor went on, 'and has therefore

instructed me to transfer suitable men from the Eisdalsa Quarry.'

William was dumbfounded. Never before had Alexander Lugas interfered with the operation of the quarries. As manager at Eisdalsa, Whylie had always understood that he himself had full responsibility for the hiring and firing of workers.

'I think, sir, that you overstep the boundary of your responsibilities in assuming the right to transfer any of my men,' he protested.

'His Lordship is quite clear in his orders, Whylie. Here, see for yourself.' Lugas handed William a letter written in the familiar hand of George, Marquis of Stirling.

'. . . See to it that Mr Campbell has all the manpower he needs to get the quarries started. There must be some suitable men to spare at Eisdalsa. Tell Whylie to allocate such as are needed . . .'

Knowing the Marquis as he did, William could not believe that he really intended Lugas to exert such authority over himself.

'I do not accept the interpretation which you put upon this order,' William told him. 'I am sure that had His Lordship been made aware of the difficulties which I am experiencing running my own operation in this time of trial, he would not place this extra burden upon me. Damn it, man, I have scarce enough people fit to work a single face at Eisdalsa, let alone staff to deploy in quarries elsewhere!'

'I had hoped to receive your co-operation in this matter, Whylie,' Alexander Lugas retorted. 'If you are incapable of making the necessary decision in order to comply with His Lordship's instructions, then I have no alternative but to select the names for you. You will receive my list in due course. Good day, sir!'

Purple with rage at being so dismissed, William stormed out. His mount, startled by the vehemence with which his rider spurred him on, galloped down the hill towards the village.

The tense atmosphere in the Factor's study dispersed the instant William slammed the door behind him.

Murdo Campbell, who had been unusually silent in the presence of the Quarry Manager, now produced a sheaf of papers from his breast pocket.

'That was simpler than I imagined it would be,' he observed cynically. 'Here is the list of the individuals I require. And these,' disclosing a thin bundle of elaborately illuminated documents, 'represent a five per cent shareholding in Lunga Quarries Ltd. That was what we agreed, I believe?'

'I heard your visitors' horses in the yard, Father, and thought I might find you alone.' Peter placed one tentative foot on the threshold, appearing to shield his body with the door. Receiving no immediate rebuff, he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

'I am surprised you have found time to visit your parents.' Alexander's sarcastic greeting after a separation of more than two years was no more than his son might have expected.

'I came as quickly as I could, sir,' the young man protested. 'There is much sickness on the island and I have been trying to help, in any small ways that I can. Cousin Mary is much alarmed about her mother's condition, and has come home from college to nurse her.'

'Dare one enquire then,' Alexander demanded, 'if it was an equally noble compulsion which brought you home from University a month early?'

'No, sir, I regret that it was not.' Peter had neither been invited to shake his father's hand nor yet to be seated. He remained standing, like a naughty schoolboy hauled up before the headmaster. When he thought about it, most of his encounters with his parent, throughout his life, had been of a similar nature.

'No, sir,' Alexander retorted, 'there are most certainly no altruistic reasons for your presence here. One wonders what has brought you home at all, since you have seen fit to absent yourself for so many months . . . following your dismissal by the professors!' Then, noting Peter's astonishment that his father was already aware of his situation, Alexander

continued: 'Hearing nothing from you, and your mother expressing anxiety for your well-being, I took the trouble to write to the Rector, enquiring after your health. Imagine my concern at being advised that you had ceased attending classes six months ago. I have waited for you to notify me of your whereabouts so that I might put your mother's mind at rest. And now, when at last you deign to grace Eisdalsa with your company, it is to your uncle that you present yourself, and take up residence at the Manse! How dare you treat your own mother in so cavalier a fashion?'

'If I have hurt my mother in not coming to the Castle earlier, I am sorry,' Peter responded. 'It is quite true that I owed it to yourself, and indeed to His Lordship, to explain the circumstances of my dismissal from the University. I hope that I may have the opportunity of putting my own case in the matter to you both. But as for neglecting my parents in favour of my aunt and uncle . . . my childhood was spent with the McCullochs.

'Can you imagine what it was like for a small boy who was housed in a castle for the best part of the year, to be uprooted and set down amongst the village children, whenever His Lordship paid a visit to Creag Castle. It may have suited you and my mother to be for ever flitting between the castle and a wee cottage in the grounds; for me it was all too confusing. I blessed the day when the decision was made that I should bide at the manse and go to school on the island.

'While it was in order for the two of you to command servants and hobnob with the rich and influential when His Lordship was away, for me it was a torment of indecision. I never knew who I was supposed to be. I belonged nowhere. Would you care to be seated in class beside the son of your father's ghillie? Only when I was physically strong enough to stand up for myself did life at school become tolerable.

'Had it not been for the care and love that I received from my Aunt and Uncle, my life would have remained a living hell!

'Have no doubt that it was you, and my mother who shaped my character. Be thankful that just occasionally my

foster parents' teaching shines through the morass which we three have made of my life.'

'A very pretty speech,' Alexander was livid with rage, 'from one who owes the very shirt on his back to the same father whom he so despises. Very well, sir, go to your uncle. Let him find you shelter and clothing. Perhaps he will put you to work . . . something I have never been able to do. Perhaps he will also pay your creditors. Not a day goes by but one or other demand arrives at my door.'

So saying, he took from his drawer a sheaf of papers which he thrust across the desk towards his son. Peter picked them up and stuffed them into his pocket. He had come here hoping to obtain money to tide him over for a few more weeks. Now, penniless and with a pile of bills to be paid, he had closed the door on any kind of subsidy . . . at least from this quarter.

'Go on.' Alexander's anger had turned now to a despairing acceptance that something had been lost irretrievably. 'Get out!'

As Peter turned towards the door, his father called out to him, 'Speak to your mother before you go. Assure her that you are still alive, then leave this place and do not return . . . do you understand me?'

Without replying, Peter turned on his heel and strode out into the central hall of the great house. He almost collided with Alicia Lugas who, on hearing the familiar voice, had come down with the intention of enjoying a happy reunion. Overhearing their exchange, she had remained where she was, dismayed by her husband's angry words.

'You heard him, Mother?' Peter asked, as Alicia hugged him to her. 'You heard him banish me from this house?'

'Why must you always antagonise your father so?' she remonstrated. 'If it is money that you need, you know that I will help you . . . you have only to ask!'

Alicia used her small private fortune to control her profligate husband. When he had married her, Alexander had naturally imagined that any inheritance she might enjoy would come to him by right. In fact, his father-in-law, a

shrewd man who 'kept his hands firmly in his pockets', as Alexander was often heard to remark, had left his fortune to his eldest daughter, with an additional sum in trust for his grandson, Peter. That Alicia alone, and not Alexander, had been appointed trustee for their son's inheritance wounded her husband severely. She was not ungenerous with her own money. She had provided her sister, Myra McCulloch, with an annuity which had helped the minister's wife maintain a lifestyle far more comfortable than her husband's meagre income could possibly sustain. By placing her sister under an obligation to her, Alicia had sought to buy Myra's dedication to her son, the poor little boy whose parents were too busy and too important to pay him the attention he craved. She had never understood that Myra McCulloch's devotion to the boy was born out of love, and not avarice.

Towards her husband, Alicia Lugas could be equally generous, but only if he went to her 'cap in hand' as need arose. She revelled in the sense of power which this situation gave her.

In accordance with the terms of the will, she had handed over his inheritance to Peter when he entered the University. Needless to say the money had not lasted long in his immoderate hands.

'Alexander did, after all, direct you to speak to me before you left,' she reminded her son. 'Come to my withdrawing-room, we shall be more private there.'

Peter understood her meaning. The term 'the walls have ears' was one which he had learnt in his cradle. His father's method of commanding respect and obedience was to employ a regime of threats and rewards. His spies were everywhere.

Alicia Lugas was content with her marriage. Her husband's position opened doors into society which might otherwise be denied her. She was not, however, so foolish as to believe that anything other than a mutual tolerance held them together. There had been little love, even in the early days of the union. Alicia knew her husband for the conniving, dangerous trickster that he was, but while his activities contributed to

her own well-being, and did not interfere with her social round, she was content to let things be.

In the privacy of her boudoir, she produced a handful of bank notes.

'See that you use this in the first instance to pay off your debts. I do not want the indignity of creditors pounding on our doors . . . do you understand?'

'Yes, Mama.'

Peter took the proffered money with a sense of relief. It was all he wanted. To be rid of his past errors, and to be able to go to Kirsty with a clear conscience.

'Thank you, Mama.' He pecked her cheek in a semblance of affection. 'I will not let you down again, I promise you.'

The Reverend Fraser McCulloch had responsibility for a widely dispersed parish. His church was built on high ground, across the bay from Eisdalsa. The site, on the larger island of Seileach, dated back to medieval times. The bulk of McCulloch's parishioners, however, were resident around the slate quarries, and it was in the village, beside the schoolhouse, that some earlier Parish Council had chosen to build the Manse.

In fine weather, it was quite usual for the whole population of Eisdalsa, including the Minister, to take to their boats and row or sail south, across the bay, to attend Sunday services. In foul weather, however, the Minister and his flock gathered in one of the Volunteers' Drill Halls for worship. One of these buildings had been provided for Eisdalsa Island and one for the village on Seileach. With so many families nursing sick relatives, the services were held this particular Sunday on Eisdalsa Island.

'Before we say our final prayers for the day,' Fraser announced, 'I have some notices . . .' He read out a number of changes to the regular hours of worship.

'Mrs Beaton has requested that as many of the ladies as can manage in these difficult days shall attend a meeting here on Monday next. This is in connection with the problems

we are currently facing and is aimed at instructing people in matters of disease prevention. Dr Beaton makes an urgent appeal to everyone to attend.'

There was a general murmur of assent from the congregation and Annabel, who had listened anxiously to the announcement, settled back in her seat, contented with the reaction.

'Now, it is my painful duty to read out the names of our friends who have departed during the past week. Sadly, I must begin with the children. Hector Johnstone, aged ten years, Martha Irvine, aged eight years, Mrs Victoria Balwinnie . . .' William, seated beside his housekeeper, Maggie McLean, squeezed her hand in sympathy as her daughter's name was read out, while old Archie McLean blew his nose loudly and bent his head forward as though in prayer.

'. . . and her two children, Martin Balwinnie, aged five years, and John Balwinnie, aged thirteen months. Mrs Adelaide Brown and finally, my dear wife, Myra McCulloch . . .' Fraser hesitated. A murmur of support travelled around the room. They saw the bereaved Minister glance towards his daughter, exchanging with her a private moment of grief.

Annabel Beaton, related to Mary because her own mother and Myra McCulloch had been cousins, blamed herself now for not having given the girl more support during her mother's illness. David had been adamant that for the sake of the children, Annabel must keep away from any of the stricken households. While she understood his insistence, it did not lessen her feelings of guilt that she had left the care of her cousin to Mary and her father.

There had been occasions when she had not seen eye to eye with Myra McCulloch, especially in her treatment of Elizabeth in the early days. But Annabel had always assumed that Myra owed her disapproval of the schoolmistress to the opinions of her sister Alicia Lugas, and the schoolmaster's wife. Two more bigoted women it would have been difficult to find in those days.

'. . . Let us say a special prayer for the souls of our dear departed . . .' the Minister's voice droned on monotonously.

Seated beside his cousin Mary, Peter Lugas suddenly grabbed her hand in sympathy, gulping back his tears.

For days they had toiled to save his aunt. While Mary nursed her mother, bathed her, prepared her medicines and watched anxiously through the long night hours, Peter had cooked their meals, boiled the frequent changes of bedlinen and set it to dry on additional lines which he had stretched across the yard at the rear of the Manse. He had carried water from the well for washing, and had boiled it for drinking. He had scrubbed floors, washed walls, gathered fresh heather for the mattresses, and altogether worked harder than ever before in his entire life.

It had all been to no avail. His Aunt Myra had lingered for days on the edge of consciousness, rallying only when her husband, at infrequent moments between visiting his stricken flock, could come and sit beside her. At last, in the early hours of the morning, she had died without pain, sedated by the laudanum which Kirsty McGillivray had administered on her final round, the previous evening.

He looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of the auburn head and freckly face which he had come to depend upon during these last days.

The jolly girl whom he had encountered aboard the steamer, such a short time ago, had become a figure of authority. Moving from household to household, she had administered to the sick, advised the carers, and sympathised with the bereaved. When she had called upon his aunt, their exchanges had been all of a practical, clinical nature. There was no time for pleasantries, no place for the meaningless banter of the drawing-room.

Now his admiration for this young woman knew no bounds. The ring of her voice, her light footstep on the path, even the faint scent of carbolic which followed her as an antiseptic aura, moved him in a way he had never experienced before. Her calm, confident manner, her medical skill and her

humanity both amazed and thrilled him. The Factor's son, Peter Lugas, whose education had provided him with an intimate knowledge of every ale house and gambling den in Edinburgh – but very little else – was in love!

Kirsty was at that moment attending to the Ogilvies' servant, Mrs McPhail. Following the slow but steady recovery of the master of the house, Ellen Ogilvie had relaxed her strict regime somewhat. It had at first appeared that the measures taken by Mr Whylie to seal off the outfall from the old privy, and his condemnation of the water in the burn, had saved the remainder of the household. But at the very moment when Ellen had felt that she could resume normal living, Mrs McPhail had taken to her bed complaining of fever followed by a looseness of stool.

Panic-stricken, Ellen had stumbled out of the house and made for Tigh na Broch. Dr David was visiting patients outside the village, Annabel explained. She tried to calm the distraught woman, seating her in the kitchen with a cup of tea, while Angus was sent to discover the whereabouts of one of the other doctors.

'My dear Mrs Ogilvie, you must not assume the worst. After all, your husband has recovered from the disease. I am sure that the doctors will put Mrs McPhail to rights.'

'But where did she get it?' wailed Ellen Ogilvie. 'We have all taken food and drink from the same source. If she is stricken, then how may I escape?'

'With the fever raging throughout the parish,' Annabel tried to reassure her, 'who can tell why one person is struck down and another saved? You must have courage, Mrs Ogilvie, if only for the sake of your household.'

Ellen would not be consoled, however, and was still wailing when Kirsty appeared.

'Angus tells me I am needed at the schoolmaster's house,' she began. Then, seeing Ellen, 'Why Mrs Ogilvie. It is not you who are sick, I trust?'

'The patient is Mrs McPhail,' Annabel explained. 'Mrs

Ogilvie was so distressed, I thought it best to keep her here until you came.' She did not need to add that she was more worried about the distress which might be caused to the patient by her panic-stricken mistress than about Ellen Ogilvie herself.

Kirsty had no similar qualms. She addressed the weeping woman firmly.

'Come along now, Mrs Ogilvie. Let us go and see what can be done for poor Mrs McPhail. Your assistance will be invaluable, having successfully nursed your husband through his crisis.'

Kirsty put her arm around the older woman and guided her gently towards the door. Over her shoulder she said to Annabel, 'I wonder if you would be kind enough to replenish the standard medicines in my bag, Mrs Beaton, and send Angus along with them as soon as possible?'

Not waiting for a reply, she set off for the schoolhouse, leading the Dominie's wife by the hand like a child.

Mrs McPhail's case was no different from the dozen or so that she had seen that day. All that Kirsty could do was to order more blankets and coax the poor woman to swallow the unpleasant concoction of calomel, castor oil and opium.

'Here is a diluted solution of permanganate of potash, Mrs Ogilvie. You must get her to drink as much of this as she can manage . . . you know by now what must be done.'

Mrs McPhail let out a pitiful cry at the same time drawing her legs up under her, obviously in terrible pain.

Quickly, Kirsty returned to the bedside.

'What is it, Mrs McPhail?' she asked. 'Do you have a pain? Where is it . . . here? Here?' At last the cool hand came to rest on a particular spot on the patient's abdomen, causing her to cry out.

'I see.' Kirsty reached into her bag and brought out a small bottle of chloroform. 'Don't worry, Mrs McPhail,' she murmured, 'we will soon relieve you of that.'

The group around the bed had not noticed the appearance of the master of the house. Supported by his cane, and wearing

only nightshirt and dressing gown, the Dominie was a sad caricature of that fearsome figure who had terrorised generations of quarrymen's children. Flesh hung from his six-foot frame, which only weeks before had been packed so liberally with muscle and fat. His skull was outlined clearly beneath bluish skin, stretched taut across his face. He staggered into the room, refusing the chair which Ellen brought forward for him.

'What is all this?' he enquired querulously. 'What is happening here?'

'It is Dorothy, Farquhar . . . she has contracted the cholera.'

'Impossible!' The schoolmaster's voice rose to a pitch of frenzy. 'Have you not taken every precaution prescribed by Dr Beaton? The woman cannot have contracted the disease in this house.'

'Nevertheless, Mr Ogilvie,' Kirsty asserted, firmly, 'your housekeeper has cholera and is a very sick woman. You yourself are clearly far from recovered, and should be in your bed. Perhaps you will allow Mrs Ogilvie to escort you there and I will come to you directly.'

'You, madam? Who are you to give orders in this house?'

'This is Kirsty McGillivray, Farquhar, you remember her. She is assisting Dr Beaton during the epidemic. Are you not proud that one of your own pupils is so able a physician?'

'Proud, madam?' he yelled at his wife. 'Proud, that one of *my* young ladies should make herself ridiculous by pretending to a calling exclusively the prerogative of men?' Then, to Kirsty, 'How dare Dr Beaton allow a mere slip of a girl to do his work for him? And how dare you, miss, enter these premises under such a guise? Just take yourself off, young woman. Do you hear me? Take yourself . . .'

The Dominie put his hand to his throat, gasping for breath. His face, contorted with pain, assumed a purple hue. With one final, indistinct cry, he slumped to the floor.

Instantly, Kirsty was on her knees beside him.

She searched for a pulse, and finding none, loosened his clothing and pressed her ear to his chest. His heart had stopped beating.

'Does your husband carry anything for a bad heart, Mrs Ogilvie? A small vial perhaps or a packet of pills?'

'Not that I know of,' Ellen replied, panic seizing her once more. 'Why, what is it?'

'I fear that his heart has stopped.' Kirsty straightened the limp form, and still kneeling beside the patient, applied her whole weight to his ribcage. Releasing the pressure after a few seconds, she sat back. Then, again, the force was applied, and again released.

'Do you have a hand mirror, Mrs Ogilvie?' she demanded.

Ellen looked about her, dazed.

'Mrs Ogilvie . . . Ellen. A small mirror of some kind?'

At last, the teacher's wife rallied her wits and snatched up a small hand-mirror from the dresser.

'Put it before his lips,' Kirsty ordered. 'Can you see any misting?' Again she attempted to pump air into the still form. The mirror remained clear, no hint of mistiness appeared. There was nothing more that she could do.

'He is gone,' she sighed, as she covered the bare torso and rose to her feet. 'I am so very sorry.'

'But that cannot be!' Mrs Ogilvie refused to accept what the girl told her. 'He was better. Dr Beaton said that he would recover fully.'

'From the cholera, yes,' Kirsty agreed gently. 'It would appear that the strain put upon his system by the disease has damaged his heart.'

There was no way that she could remove the body of the schoolmaster. His wife was in no state to help her. She would have to fetch some assistance.

Kirsty led the distraught woman to a nearby room and persuaded her to lie down on the bed. A draught of opiate would calm her, and keep her there until help could be found.

Returning with a sheet which she had found in the closet, she covered Ogilvie's corpse.

Mrs McPhail lay sleeping, still under the effects of the chloroform. She would not wake for a while yet.

Kirsty hurried back to Tigh na Broch. Before she reached

the house, she saw Major Lovat approaching from the opposite direction. Much relieved at his appearance, she related the circumstances at the schoolhouse.

'I must return before Mrs McPhail regains consciousness,' she protested, when he suggested she should go into the doctor's house and rest for a while. 'And Mrs Ogilvie, she may need a further sedative . . . she is a very highly strung person.'

'It sounds as though we also need the help of a strong young man,' mused the elderly surgeon, catching sight of Peter Lugas approaching from the direction of the pier. 'If you will not go in and rest, let us go back to the schoolhouse together. You will need confirmation of the death anyway,' he added ruefully.

The fact that Kirsty was not qualified as a physician had been quite overlooked in the frantic days which had followed her enlistment in the medical team. Her efficiency and competence had greatly impressed her old tutor, and even David had ceased to require her to show him every new case, and every diversion from the normal course of treatment. She could not, however, sign a death certificate.

Peter reached them as they were about to turn in at the schoolhouse gate.

'Just the man I need,' the Major greeted him cordially. 'I am afraid that the schoolmaster has collapsed and died – not, unfortunately, in his bed. Will you be so kind as to help me with the corpse?'

It did not take the two men long to put things to rights in the Dominie's house.

The unfortunate schoolmaster was laid out in the parlour and covered discreetly with sheeting, to await the services of William's carpenter, who coupled his woodworking skills with the duties of parish mortician.

While Major Lovat attended to the paperwork, Kirsty went to see the two women.

Mrs Ogilvie had recovered from the drug she had been given and, although groggy, appeared to have her wits about her.

'What have you done with Farquhar?' she enquired.

'We have laid him in the parlour, Mrs Ogilvie,' Kirsty replied, in gentle tones.

The older woman nodded her approval.

'Has the mortician been notified?'

'Not yet.' Kirsty marvelled at the woman's composure, after her earlier threatened hysteria. 'But Mr Lugas, Mr Peter Lugas, is here. I will ask him to go for you, if you wish?'

'Thank you.' Mrs Ogilvie lowered her legs to the floor, tentatively testing her stability before going to her dressing table where she began to tidy her hair.

'Please do not bother yourself about me, Miss McGillivray. I shall go downstairs directly. I am sure that Mrs McPhail's need is greater than mine.'

When Kirsty had made sure that her patient was as comfortable as possible, she descended to the morning-room, where she found the Major and Mrs Ogilvie engaged in conversation. The talk halted abruptly when she entered the room.

'Do come in, my dear,' Lovat invited her. 'You look very tired. I am sure that Mrs Ogilvie will not mind if I fetch you a small glass of spirits.'

Without seeking consent from their hostess, he poured some whisky from the decanter.

'A little water, perhaps?' he asked.

'Just a little, thank you,' Kirsty answered. She really did feel weary, suddenly.

The Major took up a glass jug, half full of water, which stood next to the decanter. It might have been standing for a while, he realised, but no matter, so long as it had been sterilised. Adding an equal amount of water to the whisky in the glass, he gave it to Kirsty.

'Will you have another, Mrs Ogilvie?' he enquired, and when Ellen nodded her head he poured a second measure for her. Revelling in her new freedom to enjoy her spirits as she preferred, Ellen surprised her visitors by drinking her whisky neat.

'I have suggested, Miss McGillivray,' Lovat observed, 'that I enquire in the village for a woman to come and nurse Mrs

McPhail. Mrs Ogilvie will have none of it . . . says that she is quite capable of managing on her own. What do you say?'

'The next few days will be very trying for Mrs Ogilvie,' Kirsty observed. 'It may be wise for her to keep herself occupied.'

Addressing the lady herself, she went on. 'If you are able to continue nursing Mrs McPhail, I believe that I can arrange for you to have the necessary cleaning and laundering attended to.'

Ellen Ogilvie thanked her for this thoughtful suggestion.

'That is very kind, Miss McGillivray, I will be grateful for such help in that direction as you can give me.' Something else was obviously troubling her. After a brief hesitation she added, 'Miss McGillivray, you must not concern yourself about the manner of my husband's death. I would not wish you to feel responsible in any way.'

'He was clearly very disturbed by my being in the house as Dr Beaton's substitute,' Kirsty admitted. She had had little opportunity to go over the events prior to the Dominie's collapse, but now she recalled that he had become very agitated by her presence.

'The Major assures me,' Mrs Ogilvie stated, showing uncharacteristic consideration for the girl, 'that Farquhar's collapse might have been brought about by the most minor irritation. You were the unfortunate recipient of but one of many unreasonable outbursts in recent days.'

'From what Mrs Ogilvie has told me,' Lovat added his reassurance, 'the Dominie has been quite irrational for some time, ever since he recovered from the first stages of cholera. It seems, that in fighting off the disease itself, his system was severely weakened and his heart could not stand the strain. I have often witnessed similar circumstances in India where, as you may imagine, cholera is a commonplace disease.'

'It is most kind of you to consider my feelings at such a time, Mrs Ogilvie,' Kirsty responded, moved by Ellen's declaration.

'Now, madam,' the Major announced, 'I regret that my

colleague and I have other patients to visit. Mr Lugas will be back shortly with the mortician.'

'I am so sorry for your loss, ma'am,' said Kirsty, as she rose to leave. She felt somewhat light-headed as a result of the spirits she had taken. Major Lovat also prepared to depart.

'One of us will call in again this evening, Mrs Ogilvie,' he assured her. 'My condolences in your sad bereavement.'

He shook the widow by the hand and ushered Kirsty out of the room.

Ellen Ogilvie sat on, in her straight-backed armchair, for some time. Then, rousing herself, she went to the bureau and began a systematic examination of her late husband's papers.

With the regular forces of the crown spread thinly across the globe, protecting Her Majesty's dominions overseas, the Army had raised a Company of part-time soldiers from every community in the land. It was to these Volunteers the people turned for help in providing a field kitchen and laundering facilities so that the women might concentrate on nursing the sick, knowing that their families would still be fed.

This operation had been suggested to William by Peter Lugas. Despite the distance between the young man and his father, there was no doubt that Peter had inherited from the Factor many of his professional attributes. William was quick to appreciate Peter's organising ability and gave him responsibility for 'Operation Dhobi', as Lovat had christened it.

Peter spent much of his time persuading others to undertake the tiring and often unpleasant work of providing sufficient clean linen for the numerous cases of cholera. He collected teams of women to go and scrub out infected houses, where the families were too ill to fend for themselves. He saw to it that the fires were kept going, night and day, for boiling water and for heating gallon upon gallon of nourishing broth.

William was heartily grateful for the assistance of the young man. 'His reputation may not be all that commendable,' he had remarked to David, 'but in his application to the present

needs of the people, Peter Lugas cannot be faulted.'

Peter had set out to help in this way, aware that the work would provide him with more frequent opportunities to encounter Kirsty McGillivray. Soon he became so involved with the logistics of the operation that he lost all sense of time. He found that hard work had its own compensations, and realised, belatedly, the satisfaction to be enjoyed from having his efforts valued by others.

It was Kirsty who suggested founding a hospital.

Strangely David, who for months past had never missed an opportunity of speaking out for an isolation hospital, had said no more on the subject once the epidemic of cholera gained a hold in the parish. He was content to go from house to house, throughout the district, his journeys becoming more exhausting as the outbreaks became more widespread.

'Surely,' Kirsty suggested, at the end of a particularly difficult day when she alone had dealt with four new cases, 'our efforts would be more effective if we could gather the sick people into one place? All this moving from house to house is very wasteful of resources. Peter Lugas has managed to centralise the disinfection process, why do we not follow suit?'

David was a trifle tetchy. Had he not spent years making a similar point? he reflected.

'Where do you suppose we could put the patients? There is no house large enough, save only the Castle. I am sure that His Lordship would be overjoyed to have his country seat filled with cholera cases!'

'There *are* two large buildings,' William pointed out thoughtfully, 'with good high roofs, and well enough ventilated for this weather . . .'

Lovat looked up sharply, understanding the engineer's train of thought.

'The two Drill Halls, you mean?'

David was all attention now. 'Well, we use them for near everything else,' he conceded. 'I suppose they would do well enough.'

'There are army cots and mattresses, blankets too, stored in the loft. They could be used, I suppose.' Lovat cast a questioning glance in William's direction.

As commanding officer of the Company of Volunteers, William was responsible for the army equipment provided for the men. It would be necessary for him to seek permission to commandeer such items as cots and mattresses but if he were to put his request through His Lordship's Estate Office, who knew how long it would take? The formalities would have to wait.

'What do you say, David? Shall we do it? One hospital on the island and one in the village. With Peter Lugas as quartermaster, we could soon have the places cleaned and laid out to receive patients!'

The three doctors had arranged a rota for the night calls, ensuring that each of them had an untroubled rest for two nights out of three. Tonight it was David who was on duty.

His day had been taken up by the removal of cholera cases to the two new hospitals. There was no doubt that by putting all the patients in one place, the burden of work was lessened. There was also a better chance of isolating the disease. Until now, the occurrence of an outbreak within a family almost inevitably led to further cases in that household, even where the most stringent hygiene rules had been observed. Tomorrow he must get Peter started on a systematic cleansing of all premises vacated by patients.

A loud hammering on the surgery door roused the weary doctor from his reverie.

'Mrs Ogilvie says please to come at once, Doctor.' The scruffy little lad was one whom David recognised as coming from a group of rude bothies by the shore.

'Now then, Johnny, just catch your breath a minute.' David waited while the lad heaved and gasped. He certainly considered his errand to be of great urgency.

'Now then,' the doctor asked him kindly, 'what is the trouble, laddie?'

'It is Mrs McPhail, Doctor, sir. Mrs Ogilvie says she is dying, and will you come?'

David pulled the child inside and closed the door. The air was uncommon chill for a dense sea mist was drawing in from the coast.

'Wait here,' David told him, 'I will fetch my coat.'

Johnny, proud to be allowed to carry the doctor's bag, strode confidently into the thickening gloom, picking his way along the familiar track which was a short cut to his home.

With only the sound of waves crashing on the shore to guide their steps, they soon came to the row of thatched cottages beside the burn.

'You run in home now, Johnny,' David ordered, taking his medical bag from the boy's grasp. 'Thank you for fetching me, I can find my own way to the schoolmaster's house from here.'

In a few strides, David began to regret his over-confidence. The fog was very thick here, and it was only when his foot had slipped down the bank into the bed of the stream that he knew he was going in the right direction.

A tall obstruction loomed out of the mist . . . this must be the boundary of the garden, he thought. Remembering the position of the gate in relation to the stream, David felt his way along the dry-stone wall, catching his hands painfully on the sharp protruding edges of the rocks.

Here was the wrought iron gate. He swung it open and started up the path to the house, trying to avoid what he knew 'was a neatly edged flower border. Even so, he wandered from the path more than once, and found himself ankle-deep in recently turned soil.

He stumbled over the step, and fell headlong against the door. Before he could reach for the bell-pull, it was thrown open to reveal Ellen Ogilvie, an oil lamp held in her hand.

'Thank you for coming, Dr Beaton,' she greeted his appearance with obvious relief.

'I came as soon as I could, Mrs Ogilvie. The fog has thickened, I fear. Were it not for your young messenger, who led the way, I would not be here now!'

'Mrs McPhail is this way, Doctor.'

Ellen led him up the stairs and along a narrow corridor to the servant's room: a small apartment tucked in under the sloping ceiling, at the rear of the house. The room contained a bed, a chair, and a small chest. The floor was bare.

Not much to show for a life of toil and devotion to her employers, thought David, as he studied the sallow face and hollow cheeks of his dying patient.

'All I can do is to make her comfortable and see that she is not in any pain,' he murmured to Mrs Ogilvie, who stood stiffly in the doorway of the dismal room.

As he set about his task, Mrs McPhail opened her eyes. She seemed to recognise him, for she grasped his hand fiercely and whispered, 'You hae come at last, Doctor, I knew that you would!'

'There now, Mrs McPhail,' he said soothingly, 'just you rest. Do not tire yourself with talking.'

'But I must tell you, Dr Hugh . . . you must know the terrible thing that I have done . . .'

Her eyes closed, and David, shaken for a moment by the woman's delusion that it was his deceased father who was attending her, assumed she was delirious. He took little heed as she continued to ramble.

'The Dominie insisted on fresh water drawn from the burn,' she went on. 'Boiled water spoiled the flavour of a good malt, you see.'

David was only half-listening still.

'Then he got ill . . . should have emptied the jug . . . should have . . . emptied . . .'

Suddenly the woman grasped David's hand once more in a vice-like grip.

'Don't tell the mistress . . . never forgive . . . I only took it the once . . . just the once . . .'

'What did you take, Mrs McPhail?' David was alert now; she had his full attention.

'A small whisky and water for the health's sake.' Her

voice was suddenly clear, almost girlish. 'My da always said . . . a little whisky and . . .'

The strength had left her. Her skeletal hand dropped limply on to the counterpane and her lower jaw sagged. The eyes remained staring, unseeing, and her tongue rolled out sideways, effecting an appalling grimace.

David had no need to make more than a superficial examination to confirm that the poor creature was dead. Gently, he closed those staring eyes and bound the slackened jaw, finally pulling up the sheet to cover Mrs McPhail's face.

He looked up at Mrs Ogilvie. She gave no indication that she had heard her servant confess to having helped herself, just the once, to the Dominie's whisky.

Together they descended to the drawing-room.

'Now I am all alone,' mused Ellen.

'You may leave the arrangements for disposal of the remains to me, Mrs Ogilvie,' David said gently.

'Thank you, Doctor, you have been very kind.' She sat silent for a few minutes, then suddenly rallied. 'Will you take a dram before you go, Doctor? It is the Dominie's favourite brand . . . he would offer it to you himself if he could.'

'Thank you, ma'am.' David moved to the sideboard. 'Allow me to pour you a small glass?'

She nodded.

'Water?'

'Thank you, no. Farquhar always took water with his whisky, to make it go a little further, he said. I prefer the spirit neat, myself.'

'And I too,' said David, setting down the decanter beside a partially filled water jug.

He was suddenly reminded of the dying woman's disjointed confession. She should have emptied the jug . . . that was what she had said.

'Mrs Ogilvie,' David remarked as he handed Ellen her glass, 'there was something Mrs McPhail was trying to tell me . . . about that jug.'

The widow was hardly listening as he went on, 'I must

examine the water it contains. It could explain why your housekeeper contracted cholera, despite all your precautions.'

'I am sorry, Doctor?' She tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on what he was saying.

'Might I take the jug back to my laboratory, Mrs Ogilvie? My wife will return it to you in the morning.'

She nodded absently and then rose as the doctor himself prepared to depart.

'Thank you for coming out on such an unpleasant night,' she said, when they reached the front door. The mist had lifted slightly with the coming of the dawn. David would have no trouble now, finding the path.

On the doorstep he turned to Ellen Ogilvie.

'Try to get a little rest,' he advised. 'I will send someone along to help you later.'

Tigh na Broch was silent in the early dawn. It was too late now for him to think of sleeping. He made his way to the surgery, and in a matter of minutes was studying a sample of the water from the Ogilvies' jug, under the microscope.

He let out a long, low whistle. The contents of the jug must have been standing for some days. He marvelled at the dense clusters of cholera bacteria contained in a single drop of water!

Chapter 5

Douglas Brown stared at William in disbelief.

'Miles McAllister, sir? He's the best man we have, the only crew master with any real experience still on his feet!'

William passed a weary hand across his forehead.

'Do you think I don't know that, Brown? That is precisely why Campbell has asked for him.'

'But surely, if you say that we cannot spare him . . .'

'Do you think I have not made my own protests?' William snapped. 'Mr Lugas is the Factor, his word is law!'

'Even with regard to the quarries?' Brown knew that he was being presumptuous, but indignation had taken precedence over discretion.

'So it seems,' William replied dismissively. 'I will thank you to inform McAllister that Mr Campbell will expect him to report on Monday next with the men listed here. For the time being, they will lodge on Lunga; I believe that Mr Campbell has made satisfactory arrangements. In due course the men will be encouraged to build suitable housing for their families.'

'As there is no alternative, I will carry out your instructions, sir.' Brown made it very plain that William had sunk low in his estimation. 'You will forgive me if I am unable to support the decision.'

'We are all servants of our masters, Mr Brown,' Whylie reminded him. 'Just carry out your duty, man, and I'll thank you to keep your dissent to yourself. There are sufficient problems already, without stirring the men into a mood for subversive action.'

Brown needed no further telling. Angrily he picked up his hat and made for the door.

'Wait!' William called after him. The foreman turned, his hand on the knob.

'You are a good man, Douglas. Understand that, at the moment, I am as helpless as all of you. I shall be travelling to Aberfeldy in the morning to seek an audience with the Marquis. I am convinced that he is unaware of the difficulties here, and that when he knows of our predicament he will rescind the order.'

'May I tell that to McAllister and the others?' Brown's whole demeanour had changed at William's words.

'I would prefer that you kept it to yourself at present. Should I be unsuccessful, the blow would be doubly felt when their hopes were dashed. Try to get them to accept the move. After all, Campbell has promised an extra sixpence on the thousand . . . and promotion for McAllister, of course.'

'Not much compensation for separation from their families. I notice the men are carefully chosen to avoid families struck by the cholera. Apart from McAllister, that is.'

William had made the same observation. Lugas's intimate knowledge of happenings in the village never ceased to amaze him. Yet the man feigned ignorance when it came to taking any positive action at times such as these. Why, it even appeared that he had not informed His Lordship of the circumstances of the epidemic. Perhaps David could be persuaded . . .

'Yes, Mr Lugas seems to have chosen fortuitously,' William agreed. 'When you have spoken to McAllister and the others, you had better give some thought as to how the remaining men may be deployed to best advantage. We have until next Monday to finalise the arrangements.'

The only sound in Dr Beaton's study was that of his steel pen scratching upon the paper before him. While he waited, William stared out of the window, fascinated by the long-awaited sight of raindrops gliding down the glass. Overhead a crash of thunder startled them both.

'There you are, William, that ought to do it!' David signed his name with a flourish and handed the letter to his friend.

He had been only too ready to comply with William's request, and had sat down at once to compose a report for the Marquis, outlining those problems of water supply and drainage to which he attributed the rapid spread of cholera in the district.

. . . In short, My Lord, I am convinced that the present system is a breeding ground for all forms of contagious disease. Even although this fortuitous break in the weather will soon put paid to the present problem, I predict a continuous saga of such epidemics in the future, until the whole system is put to rights.

I attach a list of those families so far stricken by cholera. The names are grouped according to the location of dwellings. This is to emphasise what Mr Whylie will disclose to you about the inadequacies of the present water supply. You will note that those most particularly affected are the homes of quarry workmen. From these, three out of five men are unable to work at present, and several are likely never to regain their former health.

You will note the deaths, to date, of ten quarrymen, eight women, and fourteen children. This epidemic has left the community with fatherless families and motherless bairns, now a burden upon the resources of the Parish Council. In addition, the school is without a headmaster.

With the assistance of a retired army surgeon, Major Lovat, and a partly trained physician, Miss Kirsty McGillivray, I am managing to keep abreast of the needs of the sick. For want of our own isolation hospital and adequate nursing staff, it has been necessary to call upon the good offices of the Company Commander, The Argyll and Bute Volunteers, for accommodation for the patients, while the residents themselves have provided voluntary nursing and cleaning services. I commend these good people

to Your Lordship for the generous and competent manner in which the work has been carried out.

I send this by the hand of my good friend Mr William Whylie who will furnish you with the details of the improvements which we have, jointly, devised.

I am, sir,
Your most Obedient Servant,
David H. Beaton MB, ChB, BSc

Medical Officer
Eisdalsa Quarries

William handed back the letter.

'That will do splendidly,' he assured David. 'Apart from putting the case for immediate action on the water and drainage works, it also emphasises my own problem of the depleted workforce. Certainly His Lordship would not have assented to Campbell's request for men, had he known the position here.'

'When do you set out?' David asked.

'As early as possible in the morning,' William replied. 'Provided that this rainfall does not wash out the track, it should be possible to reach Aberfeldy by tomorrow evening. There is a train from Oban at ten o'clock.'

The new railway had made cross-country travel remarkably simple. When William had first arrived at Eisdalsa, a visit to His Lordship's Estate Office would involve a round trip, on horseback, of three or four days. Now, the entire journey, together with the time taken to complete his business with the Marquis, should take him no more than two days. With luck, he would return to Eisdalsa on the following evening.

'Your mention of the school not having a Headmaster reminds me of something else,' William remarked. 'Have you given any thought to the matter of Ogilvie's successor?'

'I have been otherwise engaged, I fear.' The doctor's reply smacked almost of sarcasm. As members of the School Board, they each had a responsibility for advising both the Marquis and the Local Authority on the appointment of the

schoolmaster. Obviously something had to be done, but David felt the matter to be low in the order of priorities.

'It is just that I wondered if we need look any further than our own circle for his replacement,' said William tentatively.

'While I would accept that Miss Logie is competent in her present capacity,' David responded, contemplating the idea, 'I am surprised that you should consider her capable of supervising both schools on a permanent basis.'

'Not Katherine Logie,' said William, 'but someone who is very experienced, who has a modern approach to education, and whose methods have been tried and tested and found to be entirely successful.'

'Elizabeth?' David's voice softened at the thought of her. Despite all that had passed between them, he had never ceased to admire the fiery schoolteacher who had once so charmed him that he had offered her marriage. Dear Elizabeth, so selfless in her treatment of others, and so strong in facing up to her own troubles.

'But she is a woman!' he observed.

William smiled. How like David to respond in that way.

'I have studied the documents most carefully,' he asserted. 'There is nothing to suggest that a woman may not be the headteacher of a parish school.'

'It is not usual,' protested David. 'I know of no situation in which a woman is in charge, except on a temporary basis.'

'Then Eisdalsa shall be a pioneer in this respect,' declared William.

'What would the rest of the committee say, do you think?' David was still not convinced.

'McCulloch, I know, is agreeable. We have already spoken of it. The three quarrymen will be with us for sure. That leaves Sir Henry Munro, and Lugas. Even if they should have other notions, they will be outvoted.'

'Hullo, old friend, what's amiss up at the Castle?'

David had detected a note of derision in William's voice when he spoke of Lugas and could not avoid mentioning it.

'Oh,' replied William dismissively, 'nothing that I cannot

deal with, given time. I will tell you all about it once I have spoken to His Lordship.'

The rain had begun early in the evening. Thunder rolled, and sheet lightning rent the heavens. Soon, the clouds which had been gathering throughout the long August afternoon, burst upon the higher hills. Rivulets ran into the lochans and filled them to overflowing. The schoolhouse burn tumbled from ledge to ledge, gathering momentum in its descent. The turbulent waters, reaching the base of the cliff, scoured the foul, disease-ridden mud from the bed of the water-course and swept it out to sea.

Crops, stunted and weakened by the drought, were battered to the ground. Cattle lowed in the pastures and sheep cried from the hillside, relishing the cleansing action of the rain.

Relief was plainly visible in the eyes of the villagers, going about their familiar routines despite the sudden change in the weather.

In the Drill Hall on Eisdalsa Island, Elizabeth shared the duties of nursing with Katherine Logie who had insisted upon doing her share occasionally, despite working with the children during the day.

Elizabeth, having no family responsibilities, considered it only right that she should relieve the other women during the night hours.

A steady drumming of rain on the slates appeared to settle the patients. Even the most serious cases had been lulled to sleep by the comforting sound.

'Things are so peaceful tonight, Katherine, I am sure that there is no need for us both to stay alert,' Elizabeth said, as they folded a pile of clean sheets.

Placing the last white bundle in a wicker storage basket, Katherine stood up and stretched her aching shoulders.

'Well, if you are sure that you can manage?' she murmured thankfully. 'I must admit that I feel very weary tonight. The atmosphere in the schoolroom this afternoon was nearly as highly charged as the skies!'

'The weather does seem to affect the children,' mused Elizabeth. 'I can well remember similar occasions, when it was hard to keep the mischief-makers under control . . .'

'They are usually so good,' Katherine protested. 'It is as though they appreciate the difficulties that their parents are experiencing, and are trying to be as little trouble as possible. But today . . . well, you would think it was a holiday, for all the attention they were paying to me!'

'All the more reason for you to get some rest now, to prepare for tomorrow's onslaught.' Elizabeth laughed quietly. 'There is a spare bed at the far end. Try to sleep. If I need you, I will rouse you.'

Katherine needed no further bidding.

Soon Elizabeth herself, mesmerised by the noise of running water, dozed in her chair.

The door of the Drill Hall was pushed open very quietly. Only as the heavy latch fell into place did she start into wakefulness.

'Am I disturbing you, Elizabeth?'

She relaxed when she recognised the familiar voice of William Whylie.

A single lamp, shaded so as not to disturb the patients, was the only light source in the ward. As William emerged from the gloom, Elizabeth gave him a welcoming smile and motioned him to take a chair.

'What a pleasant surprise,' she greeted him. 'While it is good that the patients are all resting peacefully tonight, I have to admit that it is very boring sitting here with nothing to do.'

'Let us hope that the rain will bring this terrible scourge to an end.' William sighed as he knocked the surplus water off his deerstalker, and laid it at his feet.

'It will certainly be a day for celebration when we do not have a single new case admitted,' Elizabeth agreed. 'Today there were only two, Mrs Lavery and her wee daughter.'

'From one of the cottages in Front Street,' William observed. 'David said that he felt certain that there would be an outbreak there, if the rain did not come soon. Is it a serious case?'

'I think not,' replied Elizabeth. 'At least, the patients are sleeping like the rest, which is always a good sign.'

'You have had plenty to occupy you during this trying period,' William remarked. 'Will not life be rather tame for you, when the disease is finally conquered?'

'I shall welcome having time for my own interests again,' she responded. 'I have scarcely opened a book these past weeks since the epidemic took hold.'

William looked a trifle crestfallen, unsure how to proceed.

Suddenly appreciating that his visit was more than merely social, Elizabeth came to his assistance. 'Of course,' she murmured, 'were someone to suggest an occupation for me, I would be happy to consider it. I must confess that it is very satisfying to find oneself in demand once more!'

'I have spoken to David,' he began tentatively, 'and we are both agreed . . . that you would be the ideal person to take over from poor Ogilvie.' Preventing her from making too spontaneous a reply, he continued: 'It would be necessary, of course, to obtain the consent of the remainder of the School Board, and the permission of the Marquis, before we could offer you the post. I am travelling to Aberfeldy tomorrow, and must know how you would view such an offer before taking the matter further?'

Elizabeth's eyes were shining. 'Oh, William, is it possible? Can a widowed woman resume her professional career? When I married Gordon I thought I had renounced my teaching for all time. I have so enjoyed the little I have been able to achieve with the Institute, but to have charge of the school . . . to be able to put into practice those ideas which Mr Ogilvie found so unacceptable . . . I cannot believe that this can be possible!'

'You would consider it then, were all parties to be in agreement?' he pressed her.

'Yes! Oh, yes!' Ignoring the possibility that they might be observed by the patients, Elizabeth flung her arms around William's neck, and kissed him. 'You will never know how happy you have made me,' she cried.

'You do understand that it will depend upon the feelings

of a number of other people,' he emphasised, overwhelmed by the exuberance of her response to his suggestion. He hoped she would not be disappointed after all.

'That you and David both consider me capable of the task is enough for me,' she replied, more soberly. 'If others prevent the appointment, so be it. I value the good opinion of two of my best friends, more than anything in the whole world!'

Kirsty bent over the tiny form of the Lavery baby. Her cool fingers, probing, searching, disturbed the child which gave a thin wail. Tiny arms lashed out, knocking the doctors stethoscope from her grasp.

As she bent to retrieve it, a wave of nausea almost unbalanced her. She clung to the side of the wooden cot, and hauled herself upright.

Kirsty had felt uneasy several times during the night. She put the occasional waves of dizziness down to lack of sleep, and promised herself a bath and a long rest once David came to relieve her.

Satisfied that she had done all she could for the infant, she covered the child, giving the anxious mother a reassuring smile.

'Now then, Mrs Lavery,' she said gently, 'just you go back to sleep. Your baby will recover as fast as you will.'

Wild-eyed, the child's mother stretched a hand out towards the cot which stood alongside her bed. Through chapped lips she croaked, 'Don't let my little one die, Doctor, not my wee baby girl . . .'

'Mrs Lavery, your wean will be just fine. You must regain your strength, in order to care for her. Get some rest now.'

Obediently, the woman turned on her side and closed her eyes. The draught of laudanum which Kirsty had given her was at last taking effect.

Kirsty found Elizabeth preparing for the early morning round of bathing the patients.

'I think I will have to go out for some fresh air,' she told

her, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead. She was surprised at how hot and humid the ward seemed. 'After the rain, one would have expected the air to have cleared. Why, it is just as clammy as yesterday.'

Elizabeth pulled up a chair for her young friend, looking at her anxiously.

'You are taking too much out of yourself, Kirsty,' she remonstrated. 'I will fetch you a cup of tea. Then you must go home and get some rest.'

While Kirsty concentrated on her tea, Elizabeth wrote a short report for the day nurses, tidied the littered desk, and went off to make sure that the ward kitchen was neat, and ready for the new day.

At last the door of the Drill Hall was thrown open and the day staff appeared, bringing with them all the freshness of a summer morning after rain.

'It is going to be a beautiful day,' Maggie McFarlane assured Elizabeth. Then, seeing Kirsty's flushed face, 'Time you were in your bed, Miss McGillivray. Come along now . . . off with you both!'

Elizabeth could not help smiling to herself at the manner of address which the elderly woman used for Kirsty McGillivray. Less than three years ago, she had been just another juvenile, cavorting on the green. It seemed that education raised a woman's status in society in a way that neither age nor even marriage could do.

Elizabeth accompanied the young doctor across the village green, towards the McGillivray house.

Kirsty felt much better now. The blood no longer sang in her ears. She took in a few deep breaths, and her head cleared. Both the women rejoiced at the cool breeze which had sprung up, following the storms of the previous night.

Peter Lugas, approaching from the coalree with a load of fuel for the day's washing, set down his barrow and waved to attract their attention.

Leaving Elizabeth to carry on to Anne McGillivray's house, Kirsty changed direction to cross paths with the young man.

'Good morning, Miss McGillivray,' he greeted her. 'What a fine morning it is, to be sure.'

'Were I not so tired,' she replied, 'I would suggest a stroll to the top of the hill. It is the first time the air has been so agreeable since we came back from Glasgow.'

'You would sleep all the better for a little exercise in the open air,' he suggested. 'Come with me to the Hall while I unload my coals, and I will walk you around the old quarry. There were seals on the rocks at low tide.'

Kirsty lifted her skirts to avoid a particularly muddy patch left after the previous night's rain. He was right, of course, a walk would do her good . . . if only she did not feel so light-headed.

They ambled down towards the southern shore, skirting the edge of the oldest of the quarries which, having been filled with sea water in the great storm, had remained thus . . . a great lake, fit only for harbouring conger eels and the small fish which were washed in over the broken-down sea wall at the highest tides.

The tide was low and they were able to scramble over the rocks and round to the Pirate's Cave, a favourite spot, beloved of generations of the island's children. There was no one there today; all the children were in school, and the rest of the islanders had plenty to keep them busy.

Peter took off his coat and laid it over the sharp shingle. Kirsty sat beside him, her arms clasped around her knees, and stared out to sea.

'Kirsty,' he began, strangely tongue-tied for one who, for weeks, had ached to have just such an opportunity, 'what do you plan to do, when this is all over?'

'I shall go back and finish my training,' she replied. 'What else?'

'Will that take long?' He was like a little boy, anxious for his birthday to arrive.

'It will depend on how I progress,' she said thoughtfully. So much had happened to occupy her time these last weeks, she had given little thought to the future.

'I shall be ready for final membership examinations in a year or so,' she went on, 'but how long it will be before the Faculty is persuaded to allow women to register, is something that no one can gauge.'

'Will it be over in, say, three years?' he pressed her.

'Oh, I hope so.' She picked up one of the smooth round discs of slate-shingle and hurled it into the receding waves. 'Who can say how long it will take to get a parcel of old men, with such fixed notions, to agree to so monumental a change?'

'Anyone who had seen you at work these last weeks, could not fail to recognise that women can make a significant contribution to medicine,' Peter protested. 'Why, I have heard Major Lovat and Dr Beaton sing your praises on many occasions.'

'Have you really?' she asked eagerly. 'Have you really heard Dr Beaton say he finds my work satisfactory?'

'But of course. Only yesterday he told me he did not know how they would have coped without your extra pair of hands.'

It was not quite what Kirsty would have hoped for, but all that could be expected from David who still regarded her as a necessary annoyance, to be removed as soon as possible.

'Suppose I was to go away,' Peter urged, 'to Africa or Australia say . . . for, maybe, three years. Would you wait for me until I returned, with my fortune made?'

'Wait for you?' Perhaps it was because she was so tired that she felt bewildered. Why should Peter want her to wait . . . wait, for what purpose?

'Promise me you won't marry anyone else while I'm away?'

Kirsty was still struggling to understand him. 'Why should you think I will marry?' she asked. 'No one has ever asked me!'

'I am asking you . . . now!' So relieved was he to hear her say that there was no other man in her life, that all his well-rehearsed, beautifully turned phrases had gone by the board. 'My darling Kirsty,' he rolled over so that he was on his knees before her, 'I am asking you to become my wife.' Then, as she hesitated, drawing back a little. 'Not at once, of course,

but in a few years . . . when you have finished with training and I have earned enough money to support us both.'

Kirsty tried to focus on his pleading eyes which seemed to bore into her very soul. 'I have thought only of my career ever since I decided to become a physician,' she told him. 'I cannot put aside something that I have fought so hard to achieve, merely to become just another housewife.'

'But I am not asking you to give up medicine,' he insisted. 'Why can you not practise medicine and also be married?'

'I suppose it would be possible,' she answered, 'although most men would object to a wife practising her own profession.'

Peter regarded her fondly. 'I speak only for myself,' was his reply. 'I believe that there are many women who have the potential for far more than mere domestic duties and engaging in social intercourse. A female physician should find ample opportunity for success in certain fields . . . specialising in women's complaints or in the diseases of children, for example. Areas in which your own experience as a wife and mother would be of inestimable value.'

Kirsty had never contemplated marriage, and the proposition he was putting to her was something she could not have hoped for, even in her wildest dreams. She reached out to him, and he grasped her hands to pull her to her feet.

They embraced – at first timidly, for each was wary of the intensity of the emotion which had drawn them together. Then, more fervently, Peter crushed her in his arms, smothering her cheeks and neck with his kisses. She gasped for air and he released his grip, seeking out her hands and kissing them instead.

She swayed a little and he thought her overcome by the excitement of the moment, but then she went limp in his arms and he realised that she had fainted.

Panicking, he laid his hand on her forehead. Her skin was burning hot. He felt for a pulse as she herself had taught him to do. It was racing. As consciousness returned, Kirsty realised that she was going to vomit and thrust him aside.

The retching went on for so long that Peter became concerned that she would die before he could fetch help.

Then she stopped, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and sat up.

'You will have to get me back to the hospital, Peter,' she whispered, smiling weakly.

'Oh, God!' he cried. 'Not you, too. Oh, dear God, not you!'

He gathered her in his arms and, struggling up the steep slope from the cave, managed to reach flat ground. Kirsty was of a sturdy build, and despite the hard work of the past weeks, she was no lightweight. Nevertheless, Peter shrugged aside all offers of assistance as he carried her towards the Drill Hall.

Inside, in the cool gloom of the sparsely lit ward, he laid her gently on one of the beds, and only then allowed himself to be pushed aside by the nurses. When they had made her comfortable, he crept back to her side and sat there, holding her hand as they ministered to her. He was scarcely aware of David's presence. After a time, he found that Anne McGillivray was there beside him. Together they prayed for her.

Throughout the long hours, the disease took its awful toll of that stricken body. A bluish tinge transfused her normally full and glowing cheeks. Her eyes had sunk into their sockets, and the dark, purple shadows clearly emphasised her strong bone structure.

David was looking drawn and worried.

'She will recover, won't she?' Anne pleaded with him. 'The attack came on suddenly, but she was treated immediately. Surely she will recover?'

David had, by now, witnessed every form of the disease. This attack was one of the most violent he had seen and the patient had gone downhill more rapidly than the others. She must have been harbouring the bacteria for long enough to produce a major infection. He had no way to combat it.

Major Lovat arrived to see David turn away, helpless. He had tried everything, even resorting to the infusion of saline that had succeeded with Ogilvie.

Lovat examined her, and knew that it was a hopeless case.

He said a few words of comfort to Anne and gave Peter an encouraging nod before moving over to the open door where Elizabeth waited, her arm held protectively around Wee Annie. The child had been weeping, her face streaked where tears had washed away the grime.

David had returned to the bedside where he stood silently contemplating the wasted figure of his patient. He had come to respect the girl, regretting his earlier reluctance to admit to her skills as a physician. She had even been able to teach Lovat and himself a thing or two about human relationships, and contrary to all his predictions, the villagers had welcomed her presence at their sickbeds.

As he had done for the past two days, Peter continued to bathe Kirsty's face and arms tenderly, in order to cool her. From time to time, reluctantly, he had surrendered this task to Anne, but not for long.

There was a startled sound from Anne as her daughter opened her eyes. It was the first sign of consciousness for many hours.

Kirsty looked about her, recognising the faces of the sad little group at her bedside.

'Tell me,' she asked David, no hint of reticence now, 'will I make a good doctor?'

Choked with emotion, he nodded. 'You will be a fine physician,' he assured her. 'I shall always be proud to work with you.'

She smiled happily and laid a feeble hold on his arm, just for a moment.

She had been aware of Peter's constant attentions. In her conscious moments she had found him always at her side. Now she turned her intense gaze upon him, her eyes burning with fever.

'Three years,' she murmured, 'is such a short time. I will be waiting.'

The light sigh which marked her passing was echoed by a huge, heartbroken sob from Peter.

* * *

Anne McGillivray could not cry. She was inured to the pain of bereavement, her heart hardened against the caprices of an unrelenting God. A husband and two stillborn children were not enough for him, now he must take away this wonderful girl . . . her Kirsty, who had never had an unkind thought in her life, who had given all that she had for the sake of her fellow men.

Sensing her mother's need, Wee Annie ran forward and, clinging to her, gently led her away.

The doctors too moved aside, leaving Peter alone with his beloved.

PART II

Chapter 1

'Whylie, by Jove, the very feller!'

George, Marquis of Stirling, strode into the Estate Office, hand outstretched in welcome.

'You might have been readin' me thoughts . . . there has been so much to-ing and fro-ing from Argyll these past weeks, it's time one of you came to tell me to my face what's going on!'

'I beg your pardon, My Lord?' William could not disguise his confusion.

'First there's this fellow Murdo Campbell . . . distant cousin of mine, I'm informed . . . wants to buy the quarrying lease for Lunga. Seems like a good idea. Then Lugas talks of the problem of getting good men to work the new quarries. Needs my say-so to redistribute the Eisdalsa men. I told him to ask you to help. He says you are not willing to oblige, and will I give a direct order? Well, what am I to do? Can't risk losing a promising tenancy, don't y'know . . . over a silly squabble between two of m'top men!'

'May I ask, My Lord,' William began hesitantly, 'whether Mr Lugas explained to you why I was reluctant to reassign men to work for Mr Campbell?'

'Didn't say. Only hinted you might be peeved to have some bright new competition opening up on your doorstep!'

'So he made no mention of the problems we have been experiencing these past weeks?' William's suspicion that the Marquis had not been informed of the cholera epidemic, seemed to be confirmed.

'Problems?' The noble gentleman lifted his head and stared at William. 'What problems?'

'I think, sir, that you should read the report which I bring from Dr Beaton. Perhaps you will then understand the peculiar difficulties with which I am presently battling. Rather more pressing, I think you will agree, than the opening of another quarry.'

His Lordship took the letter which William produced from his inside pocket, and walked over to the window. The interior of the Estate Office was poorly lit, particularly on this gloomy day when the clouds hung low over Ben Lawers and the mist lay on the surface of Loch Tay like a billowing eiderdown.

As George Stirling absorbed the content of David's letter his jovial expression changed, at first to one of surprised concern, then finally to indignation.

'Why was I not informed of this?' he demanded of no one in particular. 'In half a dozen exchanges of correspondence, not once has Lugas seen fit to advise me that my people have fallen upon such sorry times!'

William felt it best to make no comment.

'Ten men dead?' It was as though His Lordship could not believe the evidence of his own eyes. 'And all those children . . .'

'Of course,' William aimed to press home the advantage gained by the Marquis's distress, 'the long drought brought matters to a head, but there is no doubt that it is the inadequate water supply and the poor sanitary arrangements which allowed the rapid spread of cholera. I believe Dr Beaton has warned on many occasions of the likelihood of such a disaster.'

The Marquis gave his Quarry Master a penetrating stare. Was it always to be like this? His interests were so widespread that he must, of necessity, rely upon his representatives on the spot to keep him acquainted with events. Lugas was responsible for relaying all matters affecting the well-being of His Lordship's estates and enterprises in Lorn, including that of the people within his patronage. Why had he not seen fit to report the epidemic? Was Whylie exaggerating the seriousness of the situation for his own advantage? Was he himself being used in a war between two self-seeking men?

He looked again at the letter in his hand. Everything was spelt out clearly by the doctor. The disease had occurred because of inadequacies in the water supply. It had spread throughout the villages because of the poor scavenging arrangements. George Stirling recalled other occasions when both Beaton and Whylie had cornered him upon this very subject. He had agreed to look into it, but Lugas had always been reluctant to carry out the work. He had managed to persuade the Marquis that more pressing matters required his attention: repairing the boundaries of the Ballachuan Estate, improving the landing stages for both Ballachuan House and the Castle, so that summer visitors could disembark in comparative comfort. The Marquis had intended that the water supply to the quarry villages should be improved, but Lugas always found something else with greater priority.

His Lordship had a great deal of respect for David Beaton. He had found himself deeply beholden to the young physician during those dreadful days which followed the death of his young Marchioness. David Beaton had befriended the Marquis's little son when his father had found it difficult to love the child who, by the act of his birth, had killed the Marquis's beloved Jane. David had used all his medical skill when a virulent attack of measles struck down the infant and left His Lordship without an heir, and it had been David who had brought the stricken nobleman out of a deep depression which had threatened his sanity. David, and his friend, William Whylie, had forced the Marquis to take a renewed interest in sailing and fishing, walking over the moors, stalking the deer and shooting the game birds on his estates. He would not forget their kindness. If he must choose between his Factor and these two, who had proved to be such loyal friends in the past, then it was Whylie and Beaton who deserved his support.

'The work that you require will be put in hand at once,' he declared. 'Beaton suggests that you have plans already drawn up?'

With a sigh of relief, William withdrew from his satchel a sheaf of documents: neatly drawn diagrams and sketches,

careful calculations, lists of materials and men needed.

George Stirling was no stranger to engineering works of this kind, and took a great interest in all improvements to his estates. He was well able to appreciate the care and attention to detail which had gone into these plans.

'Splendid!' he cried, when every last document had been scrutinised. 'I shall send Lugas an instruction that this work is to proceed with all haste,' announced His Lordship. Then, seeing the doubtful expression on William's face, 'I shall make it clear that you are in charge of the operation and will carry out the plans, as they stand.'

William was noticeably relieved at this, but before he could express his gratitude, His Lordship added, 'Out of courtesy and respect for the office of Factor, I must urge you to make frequent reports as to progress through Lugas. He will be sufficiently put out that you have gone over his head by coming directly to me.' He raised a hand as William made to protest. 'Now then, don't get on your high horse . . . we must ensure that no feathers are ruffled, for the sake of a peaceful outcome to the whole business.'

William grinned his acceptance of the terms.

'For the same reason, I am going to ask you to accept Lugas's directive with regard to the men transferring to Campbell's quarry. I know that you are short of skilled manpower yourself, but the truth is I need Campbell's investment, and if his terms include a nucleus of skilled men, then that is what he must have. I am sorry, Whylie, but that is my final word.'

By the time that William returned to Eisdalsa, Kirsty McGillivray was dead. During the following days, as the load upon those nursing the sick lessened noticeably, it became clear that the tide of the epidemic had indeed turned. This was no comfort, however, to those already bereaved.

William's joiner was kept busy in his capacity as local mortician. Normally he took considerable pride in the quality of his coffins, but recently the poverty of his clients, and

the sheer numbers of the deceased, had left him with no alternative but to produce coffins of the plainest design and cheapest timber. It came, therefore, as a great relief to be given a very special order by the Quarry Manager himself. No expense was to be spared for Miss McGillivray's coffin. It was to be fashioned of English oak, and lined with lead. The interior furnishings were to be of white velvet, and the handles of highest quality brass.

William knew that nothing could compensate Anne McGillivray for her terrible loss, but he was determined that nothing that could be done should be omitted. He took it upon himself to summon Kirsty's brother Dougal from London, where he was studying to become a mining engineer.

There were few people in the parish who had not known Kirsty McGillivray. Those who had not been present to witness her growing up, had most certainly seen her at work among the sick. Her quiet way of persuading people to do that which was best for them, despite contrary old wives' views about the treatment of cholera, had touched the hearts of them all.

The skies cleared for her funeral, and from early morning the islanders could be observed, travelling the short distance by boat from Eisdalsa to Sgeir Mhor, where they disembarked to make the climb up the steep pathway to the church at Kilbrennan.

Anne McGillivray, her small daughter and son Dougal, summoned from his studies in London by the miracle of the telegraph, accompanied Kirsty on her last voyage. The prow of the funeral craft was decorated with a huge black bow and a plume of black ostrich feathers, while bunches of wild flowers, gathered by the schoolchildren, covered every spare inch of decking.

Anne stood in the stern, streamers from her wide black hat fluttering like an admiral's pennant. She clung tightly to her son, now grown into a powerful man, the image of his father. It was as though she defied Providence to take away any more of her loved ones.

Wee Annie, hardly understanding the meaning of death, clung to her big brother's other hand and thought about her sister, lying in the coffin.

For as long as she could remember, both Dougal and Kirsty had been only occasional visitors, whose coming was eagerly awaited, whose visits were always far too short and whose departures, by steamer, were accompanied by a chorus of cheerful messages from their friends and a few tears from her mother.

In a way, Wee Annie saw this as just another of these departures. She recalled the still figure of Kirsty in her coffin. She had been dressed in a diaphanous white nightgown of fine lawn, which had been lovingly sewn by Anne as a birthday gift for her daughter. A fichu of fine lace, provided by Aunt Elizabeth, lay softly against the pale face. Her red-gold hair, which in life had been kept pulled back severely from her face and coiled into a neat chignon, fell in shining strands across Kirsty's shoulders, almost reaching to the flowers at her waist.

Wee Annie had gone out in the early dawn to find blue harebells, pink sea thrift and ragged robin, white campion and sweet-scented yellow gorse, to make up the neat little posy.

Not until the men arrived to carry the coffin to the boat, did Wee Annie really believe that Kirsty was gone forever. As she watched them lower the lid on the coffin, and screw it down, she clung to her mother's skirts, and wept as though her heart would break.

Dougal was still too shocked to appreciate what had happened. Two days before, he had been in the library of his college, preparing for his examinations, when the porter had sought him out and handed him a telegraph form. He had never seen one previously. It had been no more than a week ago that he had received word of the cholera epidemic.

There had been little time for explanations. Within two hours he had been on the train north. Arriving in Glasgow in the early hours of the morning, he had wandered aimlessly

about the quiet streets until the time for the departure of the train for Oban.

That last stage of the journey had seemed endless. He tried to recall the happy days when they had been together as a family . . . mother, father, wee Kirsty and himself. He could not imagine his home without Kirsty. Other fellows regarded their sisters as nuisances, people to be tolerated, nothing more. Kirsty had always shared his games, his friends, and his adventures. She was so full of ideas, forever inventing one piece of mischief or another . . . she could always see the funny side of any situation no matter how tragic it might appear . . . she was the first to come to the rescue of any animal or child in distress. How like her, to die trying to save the lives of others!

The funeral barge pulled in to the shore where a band of willing friends waited to carry the coffin up the hill to the church.

Elizabeth McIntyre, who had been driven to the landing stage by William, waited for her friend, intent upon supporting Anne on the long climb. David had gone straight to the church with the boys, and Margaret. Annabel, finding that her small son Ian had awoken that morning feverish and fretful, had excused herself from the ceremony, begging Elizabeth to convey her condolences to poor Mrs McGillivray.

On the far side of the jetty, a forlorn figure waited alone. As the cortege moved off, Peter Lugas followed behind, and when, halfway to the top, old Archie McLean began to flag, Peter gently moved him aside and took the weight of the coffin on his own shoulder.

Wee Annie loved the music. She wondered how the Minister knew which were their favourite hymns. The prayers were simple; for once she understood the words and could repeat many of them from memory.

She looked along the pew. There was Aunt Elizabeth, her arm around Wee Annie's mother. Anne McGillivray was staring straight ahead, looking at the coffin and yet not looking at it. Wee Annie noticed how fiercely Dougal gripped

her mother's hand . . . the knuckles were quite white. She could feel the pressure of her brother's grasp on her own hand. She found his distinctive odour, of perspiration and tobacco smoke, together with the rough feel of his tweed jacket as it brushed against her cheek, strangely reassuring.

Across the aisle, Mr Whylie and Dr David listened intently as the Minister droned on. She caught Margaret's eye and very nearly waved, before she remembered that this was a solemn occasion. Hugh nodded almost imperceptibly in her direction, but Stuart looked straight ahead . . . no doubt dreaming of sailing on this beautiful morning, instead of sitting in church. If only Stuart would glance her way . . . and smile, perhaps.

The service ended and the entire congregation followed the coffin to the cemetery, situated a mile along the track, beside the crossroads.

Reverently, the ancient burial rites were observed. David and William were called forward together with Dougal and Archie McLean, Douglas Brown, Jamie McGillivray's friend, and then . . . no, Anne had not forgotten him . . . Peter Lugas.

Slowly, the six men lowered the coffin into the ground. As Peter watched the casket descending, he said his own farewells to the girl who had revealed, for a brief interval, those facets of his own character which had hitherto remained concealed.

The natural demands for love and attention made by the infant Peter had been brusquely cast aside by parents too intent upon advancing their own position to be bothered with a child. At the earliest opportunity, he had been farmed out to his aunt, the only adult person in his life to show him any kind of affection.

Throughout his boyhood, the only way that Peter had been able to gain his father's attention was by committing some misdeed or other. At a word from the Dominie, he would be summoned to the Castle to answer for his crimes. A few harsh words with perhaps a beating from his father would be followed by a cursory pat on the head and a few sweetmeats from his mother.

Alicia Lugas clearly felt some pangs of remorse about the treatment they had given to their only child. In more recent times, she had always been prepared to give Peter money when the need arose, but she was incapable of showing any true motherly affection towards him. Long ago she had reliquished her maternal role to her sister, Myra McCulloch.

Well, Aunt Myra was gone, and now his beloved Kirsty had gone to join her. He wished that he might follow them, but knew that he lacked the courage.

The wake was not a long drawn out affair. Close friends of the family came quietly and paid their respects, melting away silently as others took their place. Anne had prepared a funeral tea, but scarcely anyone partook of the delicate sandwiches made of white bread and the iced buns.

Wee Annie, determined that Stuart should sample her own contribution to the feast, conducted the Beaton children to the bench outside the house, and brought them a plate of her own baking.

Hugh and Margaret each accepted her offering politely and nibbled at the rather dry cakes. Stuart took one large bite, choked on the crumbs and spluttered, 'Ugh! Too much soda!'

In an indelicate fashion, he spat out the cake and made a great show of wiping his mouth with the clean handkerchief his mother had insisted on arranging in his jacket pocket that morning.

Hugh poked his brother in the ribs with his elbow, to caution him to mind his manners, while Margaret, assuming a politeness she had observed her mother using in similarly embarrassing circumstances, changed the subject.

'Will your brother stay here now?' she asked brightly. 'Mama says that he has nearly finished his studies.'

Wee Annie was too mortified by Stuart's reaction to her baking to make any reply.

'It must be wonderful to live in a city like London,' Hugh observed hastily. 'I can't wait to go away to school.'

'I shall never go away to school,' announced Stuart, recovered from a prolonged coughing fit and still quite unaware that he had upset Wee Annie.

'Don't talk nonsense, Stuart,' said Hugh crossly. 'Of course you will have to go away to school. How else will you get to medical college?'

'I shall not need to go to college to become a fisherman,' retorted his brother stoutly. 'I may even join the navy when I am thirteen . . . become a midshipman, if Father will buy me a commission.'

'You know that he will do no such thing!' declared Hugh. 'You will be a doctor; his heart is set on it.'

'You could always be a naval surgeon,' observed Wee Annie wistfully. She could not be angry for long with Stuart. The cakes were rather dry. In fact, they were so awful that while she contemplated the vision of Stuart in a smart naval officer's uniform, she absent-mindedly fed them to a group of dogs which had gathered hopefully around the children. Unlike Stuart Beaton, the dogs were more than grateful for her largesse.

Stuart, his mind never far from sailing and the sea, thought for a moment about Annie's suggestion.

'You know,' he declared, 'the wee girlie may have something there. I might go to sea, and be a surgeon as well. Father could hardly object to that.'

Annie smarted at the way Stuart described her. Wee girlie, indeed! she thought, but glowed with pleasure that her suggestion should be accepted so readily.

Not for one moment did any of the children doubt Stuart's ability to fill both roles with distinction. Hugh had long ago conceded that his brother was the brains of the family. Where Hugh sweated and struggled with Algebra and French, poring for hours over his studies, Stuart, with the minimum of effort, dashed off his homework, usually at the last minute, and always achieved better marks than his elder brother.

While Hugh gave up much of his free time to accompanying his father on his rounds, or to filling bottles in the dispensary,

Stuart went sailing with the McAllisters, and fishing with old Angus. Yet, when David was asked by visitors how the boys were faring with their lessons, his answer was invariably, 'Well enough. Stuart here will be a fine surgeon, one day!'

For Annabel it had been a very long day. From early morning she had been busy getting the children ready to attend Kirsty's funeral. Ian had been no trouble, he had just slept on, through all the turmoil, until she herself was ready to depart with the family.

It was as they waited for Angus to bring round the chaise that Morag had drawn her attention to the fact that Ian was still sleeping and it was nearly ten o'clock.

There had been a quick exchange with David, and the parents agreed that one of them had best stay behind in case the child became fretful. Since Kirsty had been David's colleague these past weeks, it seemed more appropriate that he should attend the service. Annabel herself would stay behind with the old ladies, to look after little Ian.

The boy slept until midday. When he awoke, he was flushed and complained of a headache and a sore neck.

Annabel, feeling the place where he said he hurt, found that the glands were swollen. When she touched his neck the boy cried out.

'Looks like a case of mumps to me,' commented Morag, who had seen every kind of childish ailment in her long life as a doctor's wife.

'It could be,' Annabel agreed, 'he seems very feverish. Oh, I do wish David would hurry back.'

'See, here.' Sheilagh came into the bedroom, carrying a tray with a jug and glass. 'Old Sheilagh has made you some refreshing barley water, to soothe your throat.'

She handed the glass to Annabel who helped the child to drink. As he swallowed it was clear that he was in considerable pain, but the cool liquid refreshed him and he asked for more.

'Just little sips,' implored Annabel. 'You must not have too much, not until your father says you may.'

'But, Mama, I am so thirsty,' pleaded the little boy.

His mother handed the glass back to Sheilagh and nursed him, rocking gently until he fell asleep once more.

'At least it is not cholera,' remarked Morag. 'Anything is better than that!'

'I hope you are right,' said Annabel. 'We have become so obsessed with cholera these last weeks, no other disease receives any attention. This is the season for all the usual childish ailments and poor little Ian has them yet to come.'

It was after four o'clock when, at last, the funeral party returned to Tigh na Broch.

Annabel had been dozing by Ian's bedside and did not hear them arrive. Only when David quietly opened the door and came to stand beside her, did she start into wakefulness.

David squeezed her shoulder and when she tried to rise he motioned her to remain seated.

He moved around the bed, not taking his eyes from the restless little form of his youngest child. He felt the swollen neck, counted the fluctuating pulse and assessed the boy's temperature which by now was raging.

'Stay there,' he said to his wife. 'I will be back directly.'

'How is the little feller?' enquired the Major, when David put his head round the drawing-room door to see that his guests were comfortable.

'It looks like a case of mumps, at first sight,' David replied. 'Although there are some aspects that I don't like. I will apply the usual remedies at any rate. Perhaps you will have a look for yourself Lovat, a little later?'

'By all means.' The Major made to get to his feet.

'Not now,' David dissuaded him. 'Take your tea first. Annabel shall fetch you when we are ready.'

David hated to give children opiates, but Ian was in such distress that he felt he must relieve the pain.

Hot fomentations, with added glycerine and belladonna sprinkled on, had been applied to the swollen glands in the

neck. These had eased him for a while, but now he was again crying in agony.

'I shall give him a small dose of opium in glycerine and water,' David decided. 'It will have to be administered every hour through the night. Now, I want you to go and wash and change and make yourself welcoming to our guests.'

When Annabel began to protest, he silenced her with a raised hand.

'You have been here all day, and are clearly in need of a change of scene. Come along, my dear, do as the doctor orders!'

She smiled at his attempt at a joke and then, somewhat unwillingly, left the room.

David administered the draught he had prepared, coaxing the mixture down, a sip at a time. For a minute or two the little boy gazed up at his father and David wondered, not for the first time, at the absolute faith of his children in his ability to help them. He wished he felt as confident.

The heavy eyelids closed at last, and the boy's long, lightly curled lashes lay upon his downy cheeks.

David traced the various lymphatic glands with his finger-tips, searching out those which were swollen and displaced. He was not convinced that it was mumps. There was a nagging fear at the back of his mind. He had seen something like this before, when he had been working in the Infirmary.

There was one sure way to tell. As the child slept, he pricked one of the tiny fingers and collected a small bead of blood on a glass slide. He allowed it to dry in the air before resting a small glass coverslip over the smear. Having placed the specimen in his case, he straightened the sheets over the still sleeping child and crept quietly out of the room.

Dinner was a sombre affair. Morag had excused herself and gone to sit with Ian. The children had come in late from the hillside, and sidled off to bed, to avoid confrontation with either Sheilagh or their parents.

When David returned from a second visit to the sickroom above, conversation turned to Kirsty McGillivray.

'I shall always remember her on the day when she first came to me for instruction,' remarked Major Lovat. 'She was so intense; so determined to succeed against all the odds.'

'She was a fine physician,' David murmured. Annabel and Elizabeth both looked up sharply and exchanged glances. It was the first time they had heard him concede that a woman was capable of becoming a doctor. If Kirsty's only contribution to the advancement of her sex was to be this acknowledgement, it was no small achievement.

'What puzzles me is how the girl contracted the disease in the first place?' said the Major. 'Of us all, she was the most stringent about hygiene, so careful in her treatment of the patients, so particular to avoid cross-infection.'

David had been thinking about the little boy upstairs. He was startled to hear the Major's remark.

'Yes,' he mused, 'it is just another of those mysteries which surround this whole sorry episode. I could not understand how Ogilvie could have been affected, and even more astounded, since the household was well warned after his illness, that the housekeeper should go down with it too. Yet the explanation was so simple in the end.'

'Why, what happened?' Major Lovat was intrigued.

'It appears that Ogilvie was adamant that boiling the water spoiled his whisky,' David explained. 'He persuaded the housekeeper to fetch water from the burn especially, and not to boil it. Mrs Ogilvie said he had some notion that the germs would not survive if taken with whisky!'

'How does that explain the fact that Mrs McPhail also succumbed?' Elizabeth protested.

'She confessed to me, on her deathbed,' David related, with a hint of drama in his tone, 'that she had helped herself to the Dominie's whisky . . . just a little whisky and water for her health's sake, was how she put it.'

When they laughed, it must have sounded very callous, but they had all become somewhat inured to tales related

to cholera in the past weeks. The Major was not laughing, however. He was staring at David and seeing a vision of himself pouring water from a crystal jug into a tumbler of whisky . . . and handing it to Kirsty McGillivray.

Suddenly, the elderly surgeon made a curious choking sound, clutched at his throat and slumped forwards, hitting his head on the table as he fell.

David and William were on their feet in an instant. They lifted Lovat from his dining chair, and laid him gently on the horse-hair sofa.

While William loosened his collar, David searched for a pulse. At last he felt a movement under his fingers. The Major was alive.

With a strangely stertorous intake of breath, the chest heaved and the heartbeat returned to a steady rhythm. The Major's eyes opened. He seemed confused. When he tried to speak, the words would not form themselves.

'Has he taken a shock?' Elizabeth asked anxiously.

'A stroke, yes,' David replied.

'Oh, the poor man!' Annabel cried. 'Will he be paralysed, do you think?'

'It is hard to say how seriously his brain has been affected. Sometimes people make a complete recovery from such an attack.'

'He was very fond of Kirsty, you know,' said Annabel. 'The events of the day must have been all too much for him.'

The Major's eyes were pleading . . . he was trying so hard to tell them . . . it was he . . . he had been responsible for Kirsty's death. He had given her that poisonous water! He wished he had died in that terrible moment when he learned the truth. Was he now, helpless and unable to communicate, doomed to live out his days knowing his dreadful secret, and unable to seek absolution from his friends?

Chapter 2

The casual observer might have thought it a strange time for William to begin work on improvements to the villages. His workforce had been depleted by the epidemic, and further diminished by the removal of the key men chosen by Murdo Campbell.

There was, in fact, good reason for stopping slate production. The stockpile was now reaching unmanageable proportions. Malcolm Logie, William's agent, had recently returned from his travels abroad, with reports of cheap Welsh slate being shipped out to Canada and America, and swamping that once lucrative market.

Remaining only long enough to satisfy himself that his daughter Katherine was safe from the cholera, Malcolm Logie left for South America in the hope of persuading the growing Scottish communities there to support the home industry. Meanwhile, William must wait patiently for a market for the slates piling up on the quayside.

There was a second reason for pressing on with the project in the villages. Still reeling from the savage blows which had been laid upon them and their families by the dreadful disease, the quarriers were in a mood to concentrate all their energies on ensuring that no such disaster should befall them a second time.

Secure in the knowledge that the Marquis was behind his scheme, William reduced the work in the quarries to maintaining the equipment, pumping out the water, and finishing slates made from rock already quarried.

The bulk of his men were soon engaged upon excavating and lining a large reservoir above the village on Seileach. This

was to be fed by a confluence of mountain streams. A sluice would regulate the outflow into pipes which, controlled by a series of pumps and valves, would convey the clean mountain water to the village, and across the Sound to the island of Eisdalsa.

While the skilled masons concentrated on building the reservoir itself, and engineers manufactured the pumping equipment, every able-bodied man, and even the women and children, dug ditches, cleared boulders and moved materials, to assist the work.

The break in the weather, which had heralded the end of the cholera epidemic, brought cooler days and occasional showers, making the hard manual labour pleasant enough in a genial atmosphere of common purpose. Long hours in the fresh air were what people needed to restore their health and spirits. To encourage the workers and ensure an adequate diet, William continued the system of communal feeding set up during the epidemic. This meant that at the end of a long day on the mountain, the people gathered together for their meal and turned every supper-time into a ceilidh.

Peter Lugas, retained by William to continue to provide services while the villagers performed their communal tasks, went about his work in a dream. His emotions numbed by the fearful blow of losing both his cherished Aunt Myra and the girl he had hoped to marry, he carried out his tasks silently and without the breezy humour which had accompanied his activities when the epidemic was at its height.

The Manse was a desolate place these days. Peter's uncle continued with his duties, finding that, in expending his energies upon relieving the problems of his parishioners, his own loss was easier to bear.

Mary McCulloch, Peter's cousin, having successfully completed her examinations, was now a certificated teacher, and had been appointed by the School Board as teacher for the new school presently under construction on the nearby island of Lunga. In anticipation of her new post, Mary had found lodgings on Lunga, so that it was only on a Sunday that Peter

and his cousin met. Each week they attended the Minister's morning service at the kirk. Mary would then join the two men for dinner, and spend the afternoon on Eisdalsa, before Peter sailed with her back to Lunga.

This quiet existence was quite alien to Peter Lugas. After one of the island supper parties, he allowed himself to become very drunk. As the spirits took hold, the old Peter began to emerge. Stories long forgotten tripped off his tongue, while the ready wit which had once made him such a popular companion during his student days now came to the fore. Encouraged by his companions, the drink flowed freely, and the Factor's son began to regain his former unsavoury reputation.

Most of the women had departed on this particular evening, leaving the menfolk to their ale and their gossip after a long, tiring day up at the new reservoir.

Peter's eye rested, not for the first time, on the demure figure of Ellen McDougal, the crofter's simple daughter. Peter recalled the girl from their school-days. She had been one of the chosen at that time . . . a clever girl, who was expected to become a teacher like his cousin Mary. An epidemic of measles, which had swept through the school and the surrounding area, had not only been responsible for the death of His Lordship's son, but had left Ellen McDougal so affected in the brain that she had the mind of a seven-year-old child.

The illness had not arrested Ellen's physical development, Peter noticed. She was of medium height, with the type of well-rounded figure which might easily run to fat as she grew older. For the present, however, she was a comely lass. In Peter's fuddled mind, what she lacked in sense she certainly made up for in substance.

Ellen's brother, Jack, was busily engaged in a discussion with Archie McLean . . . something to do with the transportation of sheep from the tiny uninhabited island where the McDougals kept their flock.

'Will you be able to gie us a hand, Archie?' Jack asked. 'My pa is no sae haundy wi' the beasts these days, and you know how rough the ground is over there.'

Archie McLean had long since retired from his work in the quarries, but so sprightly was he, despite his seventy years, that folk took no account of his age. In truth, Jack's father was ten years younger but poor McDougal had never really recovered from the shock of his daughter's affliction. He shuffled about his croft like an old man, carrying out the simple routine tasks which required no real thought or planning. He avoided all contact with the quarriers on the island, and left his wife and son to struggle with the everyday affairs of the croft.

'Will you be sailing on the evening tide?' Archie asked.

'Half an hour before the turn,' Jack replied. 'It will give us time to gather the sheep and get off again before the water falls too far.'

'I will be there,' Archie assured the young man, 'at six o'clock.'

While her brother talked, Ellen wandered towards the door of the Drill Hall, and stood on the step to watch the sunset.

'It will be far more beautiful from the other side of the hill,' said Peter, coming up behind her. 'I was on the Rhuba na Faoilinn last evening. Do you go there sometimes?'

He knew very well that she did, for had he not seen her wandering out on the craggy point in all kinds of weather, looking for battered sea birds or abandoned seal pups, which she took home to tend?

At Peter's approach, the girl drew back and the look of a frightened animal came into her eyes.

'Don't be afraid, Ellen,' he murmured. 'You remember me, don't you? We sat together sometimes in the schoolroom.'

Ellen inclined her head slightly, and the scared look faded.

'I like to walk out on the point,' Peter continued gently. 'Perhaps I shall see you there, one of these days?'

Again she appeared to understand him, and there was for a moment the ghost of a smile about her mouth and a hint of recognition in the clear grey eyes.

Suddenly aware that his sister had moved from his side, and alarmed to find Peter Lugas talking to her, Jack McDougal approached the couple by the door.

At the time of her illness, when the full impact of Ellen's disablement was revealed, the villagers were sympathetic. After a time, however, the reasons for her condition were forgotten and she became the butt of the spiteful humour of other children. On reaching puberty, there had been more problems for Ellen's family. The village lads had become interested in her maturing appearance and could have taken advantage of her simplicity. Jack had appointed himself his sister's protector. The other lads quickly learned that it was dangerous to try to make any advances towards the girl.

'Good evening, Lugas,' Jack addressed his old schoolfellow, somewhat abruptly. 'You must not detain Mr Lugas, Ellen. I am sure he has more important things to be getting on with.'

Ellen took the hand that he offered her and allowed herself to be led away. But she turned her head towards Peter and smiled. It was a wide, triumphant smile, artless as that of a small child. She waved her hand and, without thinking, Peter found himself waving back.

At Tigh na Broch the tensions of the past weeks had hardly abated at all. Little Ian Beaton failed to respond to David's diagnosis and treatment for mumps. There was no sign of the disease in glands other than those of the neck, which made David wonder if his first assumption had been correct. While the parotid glands shrank to normal size in a few days, the child's tonsils remained painfully red and swollen.

Perhaps more alarming to the anxious parents was the onset of pains in the boy's joints. These became apparent on the third day of his illness, when Ian cried out as Annabel lifted him up while Morag changed his bed. David was sent for, and established that the child was suffering from rheumatism.

Once David had diagnosed rheumatism, he was on safer, if not happier ground. He applied the usual remedies, salicylate of sodium and sodium bicarbonate, given every two hours during the day, and every four hours at night. Immediately, the boy showed signs of improvement.

The doctor's household had been turned into a nursing home. The cot in his study, which David had used frequently during the cholera epidemic, was now occupied by Major Lovat. Although he was beginning to recover some use of his limbs, particularly on the left side, and could manage a slurred form of speech, Lovat was in no condition to return to his own cottage, with only a daily cleaning woman to see to his needs.

While Annabel concentrated upon the invalid upstairs, Morag undertook to care for the Major. The children, too, proved to be of great assistance. Denied access to their little brother for fear of contagion, both Margaret and Hugh spent long hours at the Major's side. Hugh took a professional interest in the old man's condition, noting carefully the daily improvements, however minute. Margaret read to him and held one-sided conversations. Soon she became very adept at understanding his requirements and the entire household came to depend upon her interpretation when the poor fellow grew agitated at his inability to communicate.

David, hoping perhaps to arouse the old man's interest, had taken to talking over with him, at the end of every day, the cases he had dealt with and the problems which he had encountered. The Major appeared to take an interest on these occasions, and was soon able, by slight movements of the hand and eyes, to indicate that he had understood and approved, or disapproved, of David's conclusions. Ian's condition, the acute stage having apparently subsided, continued to give David concern. The rheumatoid symptoms, which had responded satisfactorily to salicylic acid and bed rest, had left the child's joints less painful, but the condition nevertheless persisted.

'It is so distressing to see such a young boy weak and listless. Annabel is quite beside herself with worry.'

The Major's eyes conveyed his sympathy. He laid his gnarled fingers on David's arm and tried to squeeze it . . . a gesture familiar to the younger man after their many joint encounters with sickness and worse during the past weeks.

'I cannot divorce the initial trouble in the throat from

the subsequent rheumatic condition, and yet I can find no reference to an association between the parotid glands and rheumatism.'

The Major slowly raised his hand to his mouth, at the same time opening it wide.

'What is it, old friend?' David asked. 'Something to drink?'

He collected a glass from the sideboard and poured a dash of whisky to which he added plenty of water. He held the glass to the old man's lips, but the Major refused to drink. Frustration was making him agitated. He pushed away the hand holding the whisky, with enough force to spill it. While David mopped up the splashes on his jacket, the Major's eyes indicated his apologies.

Again, he opened his mouth, this time pointing inside.

'Something to eat then?'

The invalid shook his head.

'Wait!' David leapt up and hurried to the door which connected his study with the main part of the house.

In minutes, he returned with his daughter Margaret in tow.

'See if you can discover what it is the Major is trying to tell me,' David demanded. 'I was speaking to him about Ian's symptoms. He responds by pointing at his mouth!'

Margaret picked up a schoolroom slate which lay beside the Major's elbow, and holding the pencil for him, assisted his paralysed fingers to fold over her own. Slowly the pair of them inscribed a shaky but unmistakable letter T on the slate. This was followed by a squashed O and a somewhat slanted N.

'Tonsils!' David cried out.

There was a definite nod in response.

'What?' asked David. 'What about the tonsils?'

Again the pencil slid falteringly across the slate. O-U-T.

'You think that the trouble is in the tonsils?' David exclaimed. 'But it was the glands which were swollen. The tonsils were undoubtedly reddened and perhaps a little larger than usual, but nothing of any consequence.'

The Major's response with one weak hand was sufficiently expressive.

'You think the tonsils are the source of the trouble, nevertheless?'

Again, the old man nodded.

An operation would require the services of a colleague. Even in the Highlands, it was not considered good practice for a man to operate on his own family, if an alternative surgeon could be found.

A tonsillectomy was a straight forward enough operation. David had performed it upon several children since he had taken up the Eisdalsa practice. Each of these cases had been associated with persistent soreness of the throat, usually following diphtheria or other similar infection. The notion that the tonsils might have anything to do with rheumatism was quite alien to the younger doctor. Clearly Lovat had some previous knowledge of a similar case, he was so adamant that his decision was the right one. It was a pity he was not himself in a fit condition to operate on the boy.

David sent Margaret off to join her brothers while he sat down at his desk and wrote a letter summoning his nearest colleague, who happened to be his brother Angus, residing on the island of Mull.

Within a few days, Ian's rheumatism had subsided to such a degree that David felt that, with a reasonable measure of safety, the infected tonsils might be removed.

William Whylie, calling in to enquire after the progress of both invalids, was quick to offer his services as ferryman. He set off, on the evening tide, to collect Angus Beaton from his home on the south-eastern shore of Mull.

Angus, having arrived in the early hours of the morning, chose the following afternoon for the operation upon his little nephew. The brothers made all the preparations themselves. David knew he could rely on his wife's nursing skill, she had assisted him several times with this same procedure, but he wished to spare her the anxiety which he himself

was enduring. He therefore refrained from revealing the time of the operation, until the last possible moment.

When Angus was ready to begin, he accompanied David upstairs to Ian's bedroom.

'Hullo there, young Ian,' Angus said brightly, striding into the room.

The little boy, still weak but nonetheless imbued with the resilience of youth, was delighted to see his uncle.

'Hullo, Uncle Angus,' he croaked. 'What are you doing here?'

'I have come to see your throat,' said Angus. 'Now, I wonder just how wide you can open up your mouth?' Accustomed as he was to this procedure, the little chap opened his mouth as far as he could, and Angus inspected the yawning cavity.

'No socks on, I see,' he laughed, as Ian finally was forced to close his mouth. The effort set up a bout of coughing. Angus waited patiently until the noise subsided. He turned to David and nodded.

Annabel had entered the room on hearing Angus's voice. From the look which David gave her, she knew at once that today had been selected for the operation.

While Annabel had been reluctant to agree to the barbaric procedure, she understood that David would not insist on it were it not absolutely necessary.

Fortunately, she had every confidence in her brother-in-law, for Angus had been very kind to her at each of her confinements.

She waited silently while her husband prepared the boy mentally for his ordeal.

'This is a very special day, Ian,' David began. 'This is the day when you are going to show your mother just how brave and strong you are.'

Ian felt neither brave nor strong, but he was not about to admit his fears to his mother. He waited, apprehensively, for his father to continue.

'I am going to take you for a ride down to my surgery,' David explained, knowing how much the child was intrigued

by his father's sanctum, and how dearly he loved to visit it.

'Oh, Papa!' The little face lit up with a glow which neither parent had observed for a long time.

'It will be something of an adventure,' David coaxed. 'You will have to be very brave for a little while, but in a few minutes you will feel much better, and Sheilagh has promised to make you some lovely carrageen for your pudding.'

Despite her anxiety, Annabel could not help smiling. David, she knew, hated the slippery, slimy pudding made from seaweed, which was such a favourite with all the children.

Speaking over her husband's shoulder, she embellished the bribe. 'With bramble jelly,' she added temptingly, and the little boy sighed with delight.

'Can we go now, Papa?' he cried.

'May we go now,' David corrected him, and turned his head to blow his nose and take a quick wipe at his eyes. He was not so sure that he was going to be able to subject his boy to the awful torment that awaited him.

'May we go now, Papa?' Ian clamoured. 'Now Papa, please!'

David hoisted his son on to his back and jogged piggyback fashion down the stairs and along the dark passage to his study.

As the little procession passed through that room, Ian waved at the Major. 'I'm getting carrageen, Major,' he chatted, happily. 'I shall ask Sheilagh to save some for you too!'

The Major looked anxiously at Annabel, who came over to his couch and gave him a reassuring kiss on the cheek which seemed to have the most sensation restored. In turn, the trembling fingers sought her hand and tried to squeeze it encouragingly.

Annabel smiled at the old man, and followed the others into the surgery.

David seated Ian on a straight-backed chair, and both parents made great play of strapping him into it, pretending he was a captive soldier.

Angus seated himself in front of the child. A tray of instruments lay ready to hand, but out of Ian's line of vision.

'Let me see if your mother remembered to put your socks on just now,' Angus suggested. Ian opened his mouth as wide as he could.

Angus inserted a swab of cotton on a stick and painted both tonsils with cocaine. He peered in. 'Red socks,' he cried with pretended conviction.

Ian, astonished at what his uncle had just done to him, quickly recovered his composure and shook his head.

'Not red?' Angus asked, feigning surprise. 'Let me have another look.'

Obligingly, the child opened his mouth and Angus repeated the swabbing.

'Blue,' Angus decided, as David took the cotton stick and handed him a small McKenzie's guillotine.

'I am now going to attack the nasty tonsil which is making you so ill, Ian,' Angus told him, suddenly serious. 'You must be a good boy, and hold your head very still. I'll have him out in a minute.'

The boy's eyes stared at his uncle, fear taking over. He sensed his mother's position, and would have looked to her for rescue had she not taken a firm grip on his head to prevent him from turning away.

Angus worked quickly and with immense skill, gathering up the largest tonsil between the jaws of the instrument and bearing down hard upon both lever handles, to cut the stem of the tonsil cleanly, leaving no dangerous tag behind. Inserting his finger he removed the cut tissue without releasing his grip on the guillotine.

Shifting the instrument from his right to his left hand, Angus encompassed the right-hand tonsil and repeated the action, severing the remaining tonsil at its root.

There was more blood than he would have wished from the second tonsil. He was now obliged to force his nephew's mouth open wide, the child being paralysed with fear. He could see a small piece of flesh left dangling from the torn surface.

With a swift movement of forceps and scalpel, he removed the tag, and the blood stopped spurting almost immediately. He mopped up the mess in the child's mouth and gave him a glass of warm water to rinse with.

'Green,' he announced confidently. 'They are the green socks your grandmama knitted for you. I saw them quite clearly, you opened up so splendidly.'

Ian, pale and still shocked by his uncle's attack, looked up at his father for reassurance. While Angus held his wrist, counting the fluttering little pulse, Annabel released him from his bonds.

David gathered the boy in his arms, to carry him back to his bed. As they passed through the study, where Margaret had settled down to read to Major Lovat, Ian tried out his voice . . . after what had happened to him, he wondered if he would ever speak again. The words came out with some difficulty it is true, but distinctly enough for his sister to understand.

'Margaret, I'm to get carrageen with bramble jelly.' Before she could make any reply her father had spirited the little patient away to his bed.

'Thank you, Angus.' Annabel smiled weakly at her brother-in-law. 'That was so much less traumatic than other such operations I have witnessed.' Realising that this might be construed as a criticism of David's ability, she added hurriedly. 'The other children made so much more fuss!'

'Not everyone can boast such spartans as you have for children, Annabel. What a splendid little fellow Ian is!'

She smiled up at him, gratefully, and stood on tiptoe to give him a sisterly kiss on the cheek.

Margaret, unable to restrain her impatience any longer, took hold of her favourite uncle by the hand, and insisted upon conducting him to the Major's chair where she demonstrated how well her pupil was progressing.

The Major, delighted to co-operate with his little nurse, went through his paces, managing by signs, and a few shaky words written on the slate, to hold quite a reasonable conversation with David's brother.

* * *

Early in September, the Eisdalsa schools opened for a new academic year under the aegis of the new headteacher, Elizabeth McIntyre.

William's proposal, put to the School Board at the earliest opportunity following the cholera epidemic, had met with little resistance. The quarrying community too was wholeheartedly in favour of Elizabeth's return to the schoolroom. Many of the younger parents had themselves experienced the changes wrought by the young Miss Duncan when she first took up her post on Eisdalsa Island. The marked contrast between her classes, as they remembered them, and those conducted by the late Mr Ogilvie, left them in no doubt as to the wisdom of William's choice of a successor.

Alexander Lugas, puffed with the success of his ploy to wrest William's best men from the Eisdalsa quarries, was not inclined further to alienate the Quarry Master. There could come a time when William's goodwill might be of advantage to him. He therefore aligned himself with the majority. Sir Henry Munro, the most recent lessee of the Ballachuan Estate, and the only member of the Board who was not connected with the Marquis and his enterprises, could do nothing to prevent Elizabeth's appointment, hostile though he might be to the establishment of a woman in such a position.

After a great deal of deliberation, and not a little heart-rending reminiscence, Elizabeth agreed to take up the Marquis's offer of a ten year-lease on the schoolhouse in Seileach village.

Katherine Logie was to continue to teach the Eisdalsa Island children in the schoolroom over there, while Elizabeth, with the help of two new apprentice teachers, would teach the Seileach children and manage the affairs of both schools.

Sadly, she was obliged to sell the house on Eisdalsa Island which Gordon had had built as their first home in order to refurbish the Seileach schoolhouse in a style more to her own taste.

The additional strains placed upon the Beaton household

by Ian's illness, and the prolonged incapacity of Major Lovat, had taken their toll of both Morag and the servant, Sheilagh. The latter, now in her seventieth year, needed caring for herself. When Morag discovered Elizabeth's intention to sell her home on Eisdalsa, she immediately consulted her lawyers and found that her own personal fortune, outwith the practice, was sufficient for her to purchase the place. With a small donation from her sons for day-to-day living expenses, she and Sheilagh might end their days in peace and comfort, leaving the large house, Tigh na Broch, and the care of their growing family, to Annabel and David.

David was inclined to resist the idea of his mother going off to live alone at this stage in her life. He expressed his reservations to his wife as they prepared for bed.

'I wish Mother would think again,' he said, loosening his cravat and flinging his waistcoat over the chair back. 'She is so accustomed to activity going on around her, will she not find it uncommon dull, with only Sheilagh for conversation?'

'I believe that your mother is a tired old lady, looking forward to a few years of quiet life,' Annabel told him. She slipped out of her gown and began the tiresome process of unbuttoning a multitude of cumbersome petticoats. 'Don't you consider that she has earned it?'

'Of course,' David protested. 'I am only thinking of her best interests.' He pulled off his boots and let them drop beside the bed. 'You must understand that. What if she herself is taken ill, or Sheilagh needs nursing? It would be so much more convenient for them to remain here where we can keep an eye on them.'

'Convenient for you, perhaps, David. Do you not think that I, too, deserve some consideration?'

'You are surely not suggesting that you would welcome their departure?' He was genuinely surprised at his wife's attitude.

'Does it not occur to you that while your mother remains, I have no real position in this household? Oh, do not misunderstand me, I love your mother dearly. Although there may have

been times when we have had our differences, we get along together very well. But I will never be the mistress of Tigh na Broch until your mother leaves it. It is still her house. She furnished it, brought up her family here; every table napkin, carpet and bedcover has been of her choosing. There is nothing about this house that I can point to and say "This is solely mine, accomplished by myself alone." Do you have any idea what that can mean to a woman, whose whole life is the house she lives in and the people for whom she cares?'

David was totally confused. Absorbed in his work, devoted to his family but without having any involvement in the mundane activities of daily living, he had supposed Annabel to be as completely satisfied with her situation as he was with his own.

'Surely you do not wish Mama to go?' he asked, dumbfounded.

'Had there been no possibility of your mother living elsewhere, I would have said nothing.' Annabel sat at her dressing table and began to make a generous application of night cream to her face. 'I would have gone on carrying out my tasks as wife and mother and dutiful daughter-in-law . . . in the eyes of the world, a picture of contentment. When, however, the possibility presents itself for me to become the mistress of my own household at last, please do not deny me. You may not appreciate my feelings in this matter but I can assure you, your mother understands.'

David, muffled in the folds of his nightshirt, pulled his head free and stared at her in disbelief.

'You have not discussed this with her?' While he found Annabel's arguments quite incomprehensible, he was certain that he was not going to allow her to offend his mother.

'Have the two of you argued? Is this why she wishes to leave?' he demanded.

'Of course not!' Annabel was becoming annoyed. 'What kind of a woman do you think I am?'

David, by this time comfortably installed between the sheets, changed his tack. 'Has it not occurred to you that

we shall be obliged to maintain two households rather than one?'

'Is that it?' asked Annabel. 'Is it the money which bothers you? Well, rest assured, your finances will support the change. Thanks to my good housekeeping, we are well able to maintain our present standard of living, and support your mother in her own establishment.'

Annabel's assumption that David's reluctance to give his support to his mother's move was governed by financial considerations was only partly correct. This was secondary in David's mind to the notion that his wife had, for so long, appeared to tolerate her situation, while silently sustaining so much resentment. He cursed himself for his lack of sensitivity.

'But you have always appeared entirely satisfied with the arrangement, why have you not told me of your discontent before?'

'Would you have listened?' retorted Annabel, reducing him to an uncomfortable silence.

She pulled off her rings and rubbed cream furiously into her hands. For some minutes neither spoke.

At last she looked up to find that he was gazing intently at her; his expression, a mixture of remorse and bewilderment, was reflected in the mirror.

'Well,' he conceded at last, 'just so long as you are certain that Mama is leaving of her own accord, and not because of something that you or I have said or done, I shall not argue.'

David remained propped against the pillows watching as Annabel brushed her long chestnut brown hair. Perhaps it had lost a little of its lustre, there was even a suggestion of grey at the temples, but she was still wholly desirable. As she brushed, the electrical cracklings stirred him into a state of desire such as he had not experienced for many, many weeks.

At last she put down the brush, made a closer examination of the crow's-feet forming around her eyes and applied a little more cream.

Satisfied with her toilette, she made her nightly circumnavigation of the room, gathering up his discarded clothing, folding each item neatly before depositing it on the chair with his jacket.

She climbed into bed beside him, and found herself instantly enfolded in his arms. As their bodies moved together, she sighed happily.

'Why do we not talk to each other more often?' he murmured, as his mouth sought hers and his hands wandered over familiar contours.

'There is so little time,' she sighed, and then gasped with pleasure as he touched her where she was moist and ready.

'I will make it up to you, my love,' he whispered. 'You should have told me. I am such a blind and stupid fellow sometimes. Once Ian is out of the woods, and things get back to normal, you shall make whatever alterations you choose. Whatever we can afford . . .'

She kissed him hard, putting a stop to any further discussion.

Chapter 3

To Mr Joseph Lister,
The London Hospital

Tigh na Broch
28 August 1886

My Dear Joseph,

Thank you for your communication, and very helpful remarks concerning the eradication of cholera from this district. I am pleased to be able to say that there has been no further outbreak for more than a month. With continued vigilance on the part of the people, and with the new water system presently being installed, there is little likelihood of a recurrence, thank God!

Unfortunately, during the trying period which we have suffered so recently, other problems have tended to take second place, so that the latest has taken me somewhat by surprise.

The patient is my youngest son, Ian, who has developed a fever associated with the glands of the neck and also, apparently, the tonsils. After the initial fever, which disappeared quite quickly, the boy complained of pain in the joints and showed every symptom of acute rheumatism. I have never before treated such a young child for rheumatism, and find it hard to believe that he is suffering from the same problem as my adult patients. In them this is a condition normally associated with working long hours in a crouched

position, in intolerably wet and cold surroundings.

I cannot believe that there is any association between the retreat of the cholera and the advance of this other condition but I would appreciate an opinion from yourself.

David completed his letter to the famous surgeon and, as always when corresponding with Joseph Lister, contemplated the lifestyle which he had forgone by accepting responsibility for his deceased father's patients. Joseph had offered him a partnership in his Harley Street practice, and work in one of the largest and most advanced hospitals in Europe. David might have been a consultant by now, bearing the understated but highly prized title of Mr Beaton, instead of being just plain Dr.

Within the week, he received Lister's reply.

To Dr David Beaton,
Tigh na Broch
Eisdalsa
Argyll
32 Harley Street
London
1 September 1886

My Dear Beaton,

I was relieved to read your report on the ending of the cholera epidemic and must congratulate all concerned on the progress being made with improved water supply and waste disposal. If only it were as simple an affair to bring about similar changes in the cities!

I read with interest, and not a little concern, your account of the 'rheumatic' fever which you have encountered. The condition is not unknown to me, but I have not had firsthand experience of it myself.

Examination of your excellent slides reveals a form

of bacterium which is commonly found in the throat and which has been assigned the name streptococcus. *Your samples indicate a rapid increase of the bacteria for three or four days, followed by a steady decline which can only be attributed to the child's own defences taking on the infestation. Where the constitution is sufficient to overcome the invasion of these vile creatures, there is hope of complete recovery, but you must be alert to the possibility of a recurrence. So often the bacteria are controlled by the body's natural resources but not completely eradicated Any further debility, due to a common cold, say, or any normal childish complaint, will give the invaders a chance to attack once more. Your son must be kept from contact with other children of the same age who are likely to infect him with such diseases.*

Without wishing to alarm you, I feel obliged to point out that the condition you describe may have done lasting damage to the child's heart muscle. In order to test this, it will be necessary to put the boy under some form of physical stress, as soon as he is sufficiently recovered from the operation. Just a small amount of controlled exercise should reveal any defect.

If you do discover heart damage, you will need to apply the standard treatment – that is, prolonged bedrest, for a few months at least, followed by light exercise. Pay careful attention to diet so as to ensure that there is no overstraining of the digestive and circulatory systems by either internal or external exertion.

This regime will come hard to such a little fellow, who is naturally full of energy, but I am sure that you and dear Annabel will cope . . .

David read on to the end of Joseph's letter and then returned to his reference to heart strain. He had, of course, kept a careful watch over Ian's progress since the operation to

remove his tonsils. Was it possible that he had overlooked some irregularity in the boy's heartbeat?

He hurried upstairs, and was rather alarmed to hear sounds of a rough and tumble, and peals of childish laughter, issuing from Ian's bedroom.

He opened the door upon a scene of utter chaos. Margaret and Stuart were engaged in a battle with pillows, while Ian, leaping up and down on his bed, tried to grasp first one, then the other bulky weapon as it flew through the air.

'Margaret, Stuart, what is going on here?' David demanded imperiously.

Stuart, breathing heavily, declared: 'Just trying to cheer up the wee feller, Papa!'

Margaret, noting her parent's scowling countenance, blanched and apprehensively sidled round to the far side of Ian's bed to avoid any impetuous movement on David's part.

Physical punishment was only ever administered by David in the heat of the moment – a quick clip around the ear for the boys, a slap on the wrist for Margaret – any deliberate or calculated chastisements took the form of deprivation or humiliation, rather than being of a corporal nature.

Both of the older children looked worried and confused. They had been sent up by their mother to entertain Ian who, having regained much of his former vitality, viewed his continued confinement to bed as a form of imprisonment.

'Entertaining your invalid brother is no excuse for turning the place into a beargarden!' thundered David, his anxiety for Ian's welfare overriding all logical thought. After all, before reading Joseph's letter, he had himself encouraged the child to be more active. Had he not observed only that morning at breakfast, 'Your wee son will soon be up and about again at this rate, Annabel.'

'I must examine Ian,' he told the children, less brusquely. 'Go downstairs and wait in my study. I wish to talk to you both, and Hugh too, before you go off outside.'

Ian, meanwhile, exhausted by the game, had fallen back on his pillows.

His face was flushed with the exertions of a few moments before. There was a bluish tinge about his mouth and he found that it hurt him to breathe.

This was the first real exercise that he had taken since his illness. David was alarmed at the consequences.

'Let me listen to your chest, old chap,' he said gently, all temper subsiding.

The stethoscope wandered over the child's thorax, then centred above the heart. Ian's exertions had emphasised a distinctive sound that David had not noticed before. It was very clear that the heart was not functioning perfectly.

He laid down his stethoscope and took both the boy's hands in his.

'Ian,' he began, trying to put a difficult message into words that the child could understand, 'you have been very ill.'

Ian nodded solemnly, rather enjoying the distinction of being a real invalid.

'As a result,' David continued, 'it seems that you have damaged your heart. I wonder if you have any idea what that means?'

The child shook his head, his eyes now wide with apprehension.

'Well,' his father went on, 'it means that the blood does not flow as easily and quickly round your body as it should. It means that if you tire yourself playing games with pillows and so on, you will find it difficult to breathe. No matter how much better you are feeling now, you have to remain still, in bed, for a few more weeks. Mama and I will spend as much time as we can with you, and once they understand the position, your brothers and sister too will be allowed to entertain you quietly. You may not get out of bed without my permission and there are to be no more pillow fights. Do you understand?'

Ian nodded solemnly and David drew him into his arms, inwardly crying for the poor little boy, denied the delights of a normal childhood.

* * *

Downstairs in his study, David found not only his children but his wife also, anxiously awaiting his verdict.

'It seems that Ian is not recovered as well as I had thought. In fact, he is still a very sick little boy, and must rest quietly for a long time yet. There are to be no more riotous games until I say so. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Papa,' answered Hugh stoutly.

'What is wrong with Ian, Papa?' Margaret voiced her mother's own anxious question.

'I believe that his heart has been affected by the fever. This morning's exertions left him very distressed, unable to breathe and in considerable pain. Such a condition will require bedrest and careful nursing.'

He looked over Margaret's head at his wife. Her eyes were filled with tears which she fought to hold back.

'Now then,' he patted his daughter on the head, 'no gloomy looks around your young brother, if you please! There must be plenty of stories in that brain of yours, Margaret, with which to entertain him . . . not too exciting, mind!'

Dismissing his children, David led Annabel to the couch and sat down with her.

'I thought he was so much better,' she sobbed unashamedly, now that they were alone. 'What has happened to change your opinion?'

'It began with something that Joseph said in his letter.' He went to the bureau and found his friend's correspondence, which he handed to her to read.

'It was just a coincidence that the children should have chosen this morning to encourage the boy to be really active for the first time. He was badly cyanosed by the time I arrived on the scene. I'm afraid I was rather harsh with them all. I do hope they will understand . . .'

Annabel reached out to her husband then, realising his own need for comfort and reassurance.

'Perhaps you are wrong? About the seriousness of the condition, I mean. Should he not be seen by a specialist?'

'Of course,' David replied, his mind already compiling a list

of possible names whose advice he might wish to solicit. 'I will write today to Mr Gibson at Edinburgh, and ask for his opinion.'

'Meanwhile,' Annabel mused, 'I suppose we shall just have to carry on as before.'

'Except for one thing,' David told her. 'I intend to engage a nurse. You cannot be expected to run the household, carry on with your work in the practice and be in constant attendance upon Ian. It is too much to expect of any woman.'

This new burden was the signal for Major Lovat to declare his intention of returning to his own home, in the village of Ballachuan, some three miles away on the far side of the Ben.

'How will you manage alone?' Annabel demanded, quite put out that he should feel he was imposing upon their hospitality.

'My lawyer has engaged a young woman to come and live in, as my housekeeper – Martha McDougal. You know her, of course.'

David had been amazed at the progress made by their old friend since Margaret had taken responsibility for his rehabilitation. Although still indistinct, Lovat's speech was improving daily, and Annabel found herself able to understand the gist at least of what he was saying.

'Martha was employed at the Castle at one time,' she told him. 'She was nursemaid to His Lordship's little boy who died during the measles epidemic of '79. She has had a variety of similar employments since then, and I know that David has confidence in her nursing ability. I am sure that she will suit you very well.'

Annabel, pleased that her friend was to be in capable hands, made no further protest when the date for his departure arrived.

Meanwhile, a new regime, centred upon the youngest member of the household, was imposed upon the Beaton family.

Ian's bed was moved downstairs to his mother's sitting room, so that he could be under the eye of members of the household at all times.

Until David was able to appoint a suitable girl from the village, whom Annabel could train in nursing duties, she herself would sit, hour upon hour, in the cheerful little room, watching over her son.

When Annabel was not available, the new house servant, Daisy McGovan, popped in and out as she went about her normal tasks.

At William's suggestion, Mairi Brown, the unmarried daughter of his quarry foreman, Douglas Brown, was installed at Tigh na Broch as Ian's nurse.

David was particularly pleased with this arrangement since Mairi's elder brother, Michael, had been his father's apprentice before going away to Edinburgh to study medicine. The girl had a natural aptitude for the work, and under Annabel's tuition, soon settled down to become a valued member of the household.

David came and went between calls from his other patients, while Morag called in whenever she felt able to undertake the ferry crossing from Eisdalsa Island. Her visits were eagerly awaited by Ian, for she would bring with her cakes and sweetmeats made by Sheilagh, who, despite the onset of severe arthritis, still managed to exercise her magic over the kitchen range.

Hugh and Stuart regaled the boy with details of their daily activities. Stuart brought him strange shells and seaweeds found in the nets on his expeditions with the McAllister brothers. Hugh spent time trying to teach his little brother to read and write.

Of them all, the invalid's new lifestyle had the most profound effect upon his sister. For Margaret, the dreamer, usually to be found with her head in a book, discovered that she had a talent for telling stories of her own.

Day after day, school being over, she would come to Ian's bedside with one tale or another which she had invented. Her

characters were drawn from the people she knew, but they were enlarged into beautiful heroines and handsome heroes, monstrous villains and kindly benefactors. Ian, enthralled with her stories, demanded that she repeat them again and again, and woe betide her if she forgot one single detail. He delighted in correcting her when, in her enthusiasm to get on with the next part of the story, she forgot some minute point from previous episodes. Margaret solved this problem by writing down each day's narrative, and checking it over with Ian before continuing. Even when her brother grew stronger, and no longer required the constant entertainment which they provided, Margaret continued with her 'scribblings', as David described them. So was born a habit which, later on, was to become her main preoccupation in life.

Ellen scrambled the last few yards on hands and knees. At this, the most westerly point of Eisdalsa Island, the slate rock stood up like the fin of a gargantuan shark, rising abruptly from the water to a height of some fifteen feet at the lowest point of the tide. The rock sloped gently down from its pinnacle on the western face, petering out beneath the waves.

On a flatter rock, just feet from where she clung to the water-moulded slate, lay a seal pup, its yellowish-white skin mottled with irregular dark blotches. The creature's enormous, appealing eyes were wide with alarm.

To the simple girl, the animal appeared abandoned and in need of rescue. In truth, tired out by the long swim from the seal colony's normal stamping ground, the infant had been left to rest while its mother fished for their dinner. Had Ellen not chosen to interfere, the cub would have waited to be collected by its attentive parent, and all would have been well. By her presence, the girl had frightened away the female seal and her cub was now in real danger.

Ellen stretched her leg towards the flatter rock on which the pup lay. She could barely reach across the narrow gap through which the ebbing tide lapped in desultory fashion. Determined to reach the young seal, she pulled back, electing to jump the

distance. Bracing herself against the rock, she gathered her strength and made a tremendous leap, landing awkwardly and turning her ankle. The pain caused her to cry out, and the sound, caught on the westerly breeze, attracted the attention of the single person on an otherwise deserted beach.

Peter Lugas looked up to see the distant figure of Ellen McDougal, struggling to regain her footing on weed-covered rock.

The seal cub, meanwhile, had slid from the rock in its fright, and was wallowing in the sea making grunting noises of distress, guaranteed to bring its mother on to the scene.

Peter, his feet slithering on the freshly washed slate, made what speed he could across a narrow peninsula of rock. Nevertheless, twenty minutes or more passed before he came to the spot from which the girl had launched herself.

'Ellen,' he called, hoping not to startle her too much.

At the sound of his voice, the girl threw up her head in alarm but, recognising him, she smiled and lifted her arms towards him, confident that he had come to rescue her.

'Can you jump?' he called. 'Don't be afraid, I will catch you.'

Even as he spoke, the turning tide threatened to wash over the rock on which she stood. It would be completely submerged in a few minutes.

'I will count to three,' he suggested. 'On three, you jump. Do you understand?'

She nodded, and positioning herself for the leap to safety, waited for his call.

'One . . . two . . . three!' he shouted. Ellen came flying towards him. He caught her in his outstretched arms and held on tightly. Struggling to regain a foothold on the slippery surface, they both clung to the jagged slate.

The girl's flimsy muslin dress was soaking wet. The bodice clung to her bosom so closely that he could see her nipples, and the dark glow of their surrounding areolae. Averting his gaze, for fear of offending her, he grasped her firmly by the arm to prevent her from slipping.

She was shaking; whether from cold or fright he could not tell.

Having allowed her a few minutes to recover, Peter tried to persuade her to follow him. At first she was reluctant. Her brother had been so careful to instil in her a distrust of men outside the immediate family circle that she found it hard to overcome her reticence.

The tide was rising fast now, and Peter was well aware of the danger that they were both in. He sighed with relief when the girl finally indicated her willingness to go with him.

He took a few tentative steps. After a further moment of hesitation, she allowed him to take her hand and began to follow him. Soon they were both scrambling across the rock on their bottoms. Peter was obliged to help the girl when she had to put any weight on her injured foot, but for the most part she managed alone.

At last they were ahead of the advancing waves. Peter helped her from the last of the outcropping rocks, down on to a shingle beach. Here, Ellen could progress no further. At every step, a sharp pain shot up her leg. Peter lifted her in his arms and carried her.

All afternoon grey clouds had been gathering. Now a cold sea fog descended quite suddenly, drawn in by the advancing tide. Ahead of them, Peter recalled that there was a large sea cave . . . a place where, as children, he and his school friends had passed many carefree hours. As the rain began to fall heavily, he hurried towards the dark entrance, carrying his burden into the shelter of the overhanging rock.

At the highest tides, the sea washed right to the back of the cave. Here, a raised platform of rock was carpeted in dry seaweed, left by the highest of the last spring tides. Today, Peter judged, the sea would barely reach the base of this shelf. They would be safe, even if the rain lasted until high water.

He lowered Ellen on to the shelf of rock, and removed his jacket to cover her thin garments.

She shivered violently.

He sat down beside her, placing his arm firmly around her shoulders.

'Is that better?' he asked softly.

The wide-set, startlingly blue eyes gazed up at him, full of trust. She nodded, smiling.

'It feels lovely,' she said innocently as he held her more securely still, his fingers brushing lightly across her firmly erect nipples.

She shivered only slightly now as he eased her back, very gently, until she lay upon the seaweed. Sinking down beside her, he pulled her towards him and enfolded her in his warm embrace.

For some time they lay thus, close together, not moving, his arms around her. At last the shivering stopped, and Peter realised that Ellen was asleep.

He shifted his position, cautiously, so as not to disturb her, and sat up to survey the state of the tide.

The sea had come into the cave and was rippling gently along the walls at each surge of the waves.

He could see more clearly now. The rain had stopped, and the light of the setting sun caught the rippling waters, casting bright patterns on the damp rock of the cave wall.

Soon the sea would be lapping right up against the platform on which they perched. There was no escape for them until the turn of the tide.

He looked back at his companion.

Ellen seemed so frail and helpless as she lay there in her white gown. Drying slowly, the thin material clung closely to her body revealing every contour, every secret hollow. Her hair was thick and long. Tossed by the wind and sticky with the salt from the sea breeze, it surrounded her face in an unkempt halo.

The light intensified, turning red as the sun set. The warm rays fell on the girl's head, reminding Peter poignantly of the way that Kirsty's red-gold hair had shone in the firelight.

He was filled with sudden anger. Why was this mindless

creature who could contribute so little to the world, spared from that vile disease, when his courageous Kirsty with life, love, and a distinguished career to look forward to, had been taken from him? They had not even had time to express their love for one another properly, let alone to consummate it.

He was filled with an unreasoning desire for retribution. Animal lust, borne of long abstinence, blurred any natural consideration for the girl. He flung himself upon Ellen's still, sleeping form.

Waking suddenly, the girl opened her mouth to scream, but before she could utter a sound, he covered her lips with his own and bore down upon her so heavily that he left her gasping for breath.

His hands moved swiftly across her body, tearing at her flimsy garments. Pulling the gown from her shoulders, he exposed her ripening breasts.

She cried out as his mouth closed over one bud-like nipple. With teeth and tongue he teased it carelessly before he released it and attacked the other.

Despite her struggles, his hands moved lower. They were hard and cruel as they grabbed her, all the time stripping away what covering she had left. Finally she lay naked and bruised, her skin glowing in the half light of the gloomy cave.

Now his mouth moved over the exposed abdomen, his tongue licking into her navel before it followed the thin line downwards. Petrified by fear, the girl lay still, instinct telling her that to resist further would encourage him to even greater savagery.

He grabbed at the patch of downy hair between her thighs and pulled her legs apart, probing roughly. Then, his search rewarded, he mounted her.

He penetrated the virgin girl, and she cried out again, a short, sharp scream of pain.

As his movements became more intense, Peter lost all sense of time or place. He was thrusting deeply, harder

and harder, gaining that release which had for so long been denied him. The girl gasped under his weight as he reached his climax.

The silence which followed was broken by Ellen's animal-like whimpering, and the gentle lapping of water against the rock shelf.

At last he rolled away from her, breathing heavily. He turned to look at the simple-minded girl who lay curled up in a ball, sobbing uncontrollably.

Only then did he realise fully the enormity of what he had done. He knelt beside her, offering her the discarded garment with which to cover herself. She grabbed at it, all the while glaring at him accusingly.

No words passed between them.

For the next hour, he sat watching the water receding, too sick and ashamed to dare to look at the girl who moaned softly to herself while she tried to pull on her clothing. When she had finished, she crouched against the wall and stared at the water, willing it to go away.

When at last Peter judged it was safe to leave, he climbed down from the shelf and offered her his hand. She declined, shuffling towards the edge of the rock and letting herself down on to the floor of the cave.

Peter waited as, using the slimy wall for a prop, she struggled, gingerly testing the injured ankle, towards the mouth of the cave.

Out in the open, the evening air was cool. Ellen shivered a little, then straightened up, throwing back her head in a pathetic gesture of defiance. She found that she could now stand without support, so shying away from Peter's proffered hand, made her way falteringly across the beach and up on to the footpath.

Peter followed until they were in sight of McDougal's croft house. Satisfied that Ellen was now safe, he turned for home, his pace quickening as the darkness closed around him.

* * *

'There is no question about it,' thundered Sir Henry Munro. 'I was misled . . . totally deceived!' He turned abruptly to his lawyer, a yellowing, wizened creature who, on cue, produced the relevant paper from a heap of documents which lay before him on the long oak table.

'Eh,' he began, in a high-pitched, whining tone which was beginning to irritate Alexander Lugas to the point of distraction, 'it does quite clearly state that at the end of five years all the remaining crofts appertaining to the tenancy shall revert to the main estate. The document, as you will observe, is dated November 1878. It is now 1886. The agreed time was reached three years ago. Out of consideration for His Lordship's wishes, my client has withheld his claim on the lands in question until now. It is however a fact, Mr Lugas, that Sir Henry is fully justified in asserting his legal right to the land. There is not a court in the kingdom that would not find in his favour!'

Lugas had no reason to disbelieve him. He had taken heavy bribes to procure these additional rights for the Ballachuan Estate for Sir Henry's predecessor and Sir Henry had paid over the odds to retain them. Alexander Lugas had an obligation to see that the terms of the contract were fulfilled. Unfortunately for him, those crofters whom he had expected to go without argument had proved more recalcitrant than he would have believed. Even the extortionate rents which he had introduced, had failed to shift them. On appeal to the Marquis, the crofters' claim that the new rents were too high was upheld. Lugas had, on that occasion, been forced to settle for a rent which the crofters were able and willing to pay.

On taking over the estate Sir Henry Munro had accepted assurances that all the land would eventually revert to him, and had waited impatiently for a further three years while Lugas tried by every means available to oust the farmers. Sir Henry's patience had at last run out. Alexander Lugas would have to defy His Lordship's orders and again demand rents which he knew the crofters would be unable to meet.

Alexander Lugas was one of those human beings who go through life believing that, if ignored long enough, insoluble problems will eventually go away of their own accord. Having failed to remove the offending crofters three years before, he had put the matter to one side, never giving it another thought until he had received the lawyer's demand for an audience.

Prepared to be challenged once more upon the thorny problem, he had already calculated the time within which he could remove the tenants, without running foul of the law. If he served notice of rent increases at the October rent gathering, the people could be evicted within six months.

'I assure you, Mr Leith,' he asserted, 'the crofts will be cleared by May of next year at the latest. I regret that Sir Henry has been inconvenienced for so long.'

Hardly mollified at all by this pledge, Sir Henry rose to his feet. 'What makes you think that the crofters will respond favourably to your new demands?' he snapped.

'Three wet summers, and now this drought, have depleted their harvests to such an extent that they can barely feed their families, let alone set aside money for the rent. I believe that I shall need to increase the charge by no more than a few pence on the acre to finish them!'

'How you achieve your end is immaterial to my client, Mr Lugas. I shall draw up a document confirming your agreement to hand over the remaining lands at twelve noon on 1 May 1887. If you wish to avoid the indignity and the not insubstantial cost of a law suit, you will sign and return it within the week!' The lawyer gathered his papers and nodded to his client.

'Good day, sir,' he said formally. Sir Henry remained silent.

'Good day, Mr Leith. Sir Henry.' Lugas summoned his servant who ushered the two men out of the Estate Office by way of a steep flight of steps to the courtyard below.

Under other circumstances, Alexander might have allowed

his visitors to use the front entrance to the Castle. In His Lordship's absence, the Factor was entitled to treat the mansion as his own. His visitors would not be unaware of the slight intended by his insistence that they use the back stairs. Take him to court would they indeed! He would soon show that pompous fool and his legal lackey that Alexander Lugas was not a man to go back on his word!

PART III

Chapter 1

A.P. Gibson, MD, LLD, DSc, FRCPE, was a round, jovial gentleman. White mutton-chop whiskers surrounded cheeks whose ruddiness owed far more to the whisky bottle than to the stiff westerly breezes which had accompanied his passage by steamer to Eisdalsa. Piercingly bright eyes peered out from beneath eyebrows which might have been models for those pictures of Santa Claus now appearing in the children's newspapers at every Christmas season.

David, waiting anxiously on the pier for the *Marquis of Lorn II* to tie up, spotted his visitor beside the rail, obviously impatient to disembark.

Calling upon a small urchin standing beside his chaise, David draped the reins over the front of the box.

'Here, hold my horse, lad,' he commanded. 'If you stay there with him until I come, you shall have a penny!'

The boy addressed grabbed eagerly at the horse's bridle. As the animal threw up his head, the child gentled him with an expert touch and soft words of encouragement. The horse settled down to wait for his master, and wee Johnny McGovan spent the promised penny several times over in his imagination.

Mr Gibson was no lightweight. The companionway gave beneath his feet, causing more than one of his fellow passengers to cling to the rail for dear life!

As his feet hit terra firma, David advanced from the waiting crowd, his hand extended in welcome. 'Mr Gibson, sir, this is a very great pleasure.'

'How are ye, Beaton m' lad? Put on a bit of weight since we last met, I see.' He prodded David playfully in the abdomen.

'Wholesome country fare. Always good for putting a few layers of fat on your bones, eh?'

David noted the startled glances of some of his patients, unused to hearing their physician addressed in such a familiar way. To avoid further embarrassment, he steered the old gentleman towards his carriage, picking up from a pile of passengers' luggage on the quay a leather valise which Gibson pointed out to him.

He would have taken the small Gladstone bag which his colleague carried, but Gibson declined the offer. 'Never let go of the tools of m'trade, don't yer know,' he barked, nudging David in the ribs. 'Wouldn't trust anyone with this little feller!'

Had he not cherished such a profound faith in this gentleman's ability as a cardiac specialist, David might, by now, have been regretting his anxious invitation to his old mentor.

He handed his portly visitor up into the carriage, and turning to Johnny, felt in his waistcoat pocket. He could find nothing smaller than a sixpence. On another occasion he might have searched more diligently for the promised penny. As it was, he was anxious to be gone from this company before his guest made any further loud comments.

'There you are, sonny!' He dropped the sixpence into the astonished child's outstretched hand, and caught up the reins.

In a few minutes they were bowling along through the village, passing as they did so a straggle of late-summer visitors making their way to the steamer, bent on continuing their journey north to Fort William.

'Y'know, Beaton, this would be a pretty little place were it not for the quarrying,' remarked Gibson.

'If it were not for the quarries, the village would have no reason for its existence,' observed David drily. 'Should the quarries cease operations, there being no alternative employment, all the men would be forced to leave.'

'And that would be a fair slice of your practice gone, no doubt?' Gibson enquired.

'I do have a contract with the Company, yes,' agreed David, 'but there is a substantial private practice also. I can assure you, I am never obliged to look for work!'

'I often wondered why you chose to bury yourself here,' the older man mused. 'I was given to understand that you turned down a very good offer of a London position. Is that correct?'

'Mr Lister invited me to join him at the London Hospital,' David confirmed, 'but unfortunately my father died, and I was obliged to secure the practice here. It was my intention to remain only until a suitable successor to my father could be found, but pressure mounted upon me to stay, and I cannot say that I regret the decision.'

'You were intent upon surgery, as I remember,' Gibson probed a little further. 'Can't be too much opportunity for that, here!'

'You might be surprised to see my records of surgical work,' David replied, somewhat nettled. 'The surroundings may be primitive, but I can assure you that I practise surgery which is as clinically sound as that in any hospital.'

The older man, pleased to have elicited such a spirited response, laughed heartily and clapped David on the shoulder.

'I have every faith in your ability, my dear young friend!'

The lightweight vehicle bounced over an unexpected rut or two, and Gibson was obliged to hold on or be shaken out of his seat.

As they passed by the schoolhouse garden, Elizabeth looked up from her weeding, recognised David's carriage, and waved.

'By Jove,' commented the eminent physician, 'I can see that there are compensations for taking a country practice!'

'Mrs McIntyre is in charge of our parish school,' David explained, colouring slightly at the ability of this astute gentleman to sum up a situation with such immediacy and accuracy. He was not to know that had it not been for Elizabeth Duncan, as she had been then, David would have gone to London without any hesitation. That she had ended up as the widowed headmistress of the village school, and not as

Mrs David Beaton, was not due to any lack of effort on that gentleman's part!

Seeing that he had touched on a sensitive topic, Gibson turned his attention to the purpose of his visit.

'Tell me about the boy, Beaton,' he demanded, 'all the symptoms, from when he first became ill.'

David reined in the horse, and they sauntered the last half mile to Tigh na Broch while he related, in great detail, the history of Ian's illness and the treatment he had received.

Gibson listened carefully, interjecting the occasional question but otherwise allowing David to explain events in his own methodical manner.

As they pulled up before the house, Angus Murchison, the Beatons' groom, stepped forward to take charge of the horse. The older man levered himself out of his seat and, with a little help from his host, made an ungainly descent.

Annabel had been waiting most anxiously for the arrival of the renowned physician whose name had been a byword amongst the nurses with whom she had trained. As the chaise came to a halt, she came forward to greet him.

'Mrs Beaton?' queried her guest, not waiting for David to introduce them. 'This is a great pleasure, ma'am.' With the courtesy of half a century before, he took her hand and bowed as he kissed it.

Annabel was suitably impressed.

'You are most welcome, Mr Gibson,' she said, smiling. 'It is very kind of you to have made this long journey to see little Ian.'

She led the way into the house, Gibson following. David, struggling with the great man's valise, found himself obliged to wrestle with the closing door also, for it had been left to swing back in his face!

Since his old professor had stepped on to the quay, David had felt himself relegated to the position of pupil, assistant, lackey even . . . a situation which he did not relish. For the sake of his little son, however, he would tolerate these indignities. Hopefully, the professor would not be staying for long.

After a few days of sulking, and one or two minor tantrums, Ian had adjusted to the regime imposed upon him by David and Annabel, but he was often fretful and had to be coaxed to take his medicine. Time had passed slowly for them all.

During the weeks since David had discovered that the boy's heart was defective, family and friends had done their best to keep Ian occupied. While Margaret brought him the most stimulating entertainment, Hugh concentrated on teaching the little boy. He had a quick mind and an extraordinarily retentive memory, so that numbers and letters were soon mastered, and he could read simple books for himself. Once this had been achieved, it was a little easier for everyone because, for increasingly longer periods, he could amuse himself.

Ordinarily, at the age of four, Ian would have gone to school, joining the class for infants which Elizabeth had introduced. When the children were expected to leave school and begin working at such an early age, Elizabeth insisted that the sooner they began their education, the better.

For harassed mothers, the infants' class was a godsend, and the School Board readily agreed to this initiative by their new headteacher.

When Annabel had expressed a concern to Elizabeth that Ian might be left behind, owing to his enforced absence from school, Elizabeth had agreed to provide what reading matter she had available, and Hugh had undertaken to instruct his little brother.

Professor Gibson was impressed with the sparky little fellow who greeted him, saying, 'My papa says that you are coming to listen to my heart. You have come a very long way just to do that!'

'That depends upon how interesting a heart you have to listen to,' replied Gibson. 'What's this you are reading?' He picked up a thin paper booklet. '*Tales For the Very Young*,' he intoned. 'I trust you find them illuminating?'

'Oh, yes,' replied the boy. 'There are lots of pictures.'

Gibson glanced at Ian over the top of his spectacles, decided he was too young to be taking a rise out of him, and sat down on the bed, grasping the child's wrist between his fingers.

'I suppose, in your stories, the good people always win through in the end?' he queried.

'Yes,' Ian agreed, 'and the bad people get their just deserts.'

The physician regarded his small patient solemnly. 'And would you say that you are a good person or a bad person?'

'Mama says I am good when I take my medicine,' the child responded.

'Well then,' said Gibson, taking up his stethoscope and listening intently for a few minutes to what was happening under the scrawny little rib cage, 'if you are as good as you say, I expect that you will soon get your reward.'

He looked intently at the boy's finger and toenails, examined his eyes, tested his reflexes, and felt, with a most delicate touch, those joints which, in the early stages of his illness, had given Ian so much pain.

'What would you wish that reward to be?' Gibson enquired as he pushed his stethoscope back into his pocket.

'Oh, to go outside to play!' Ian declared, all the frustration of the past weeks poured into the words.

'It is early days for playing outside,' the doctor told him, 'but I would like you to try and take a few steps for me. Do you think you could do that?'

Annabel and David had all this time hovered in the background, leaving Gibson to carry out his examination without interruption.

Annabel now stepped forward, producing the boy's slippers and helping him to slide out of bed.

'Will you go and stand by the door, Mrs Beaton?' Gibson suggested, and when she had taken up her position, 'Now, young Ian, I want you to walk to your mother, touch her hand, then turn round and return to me.'

The boy did as he was told, staggering after so long in bed, but happy to be on his feet. When he returned, Gibson listened again to his heart and seemed satisfied.

'Now,' he said, 'we shall go out into the hall and you shall show me how many stairs you can climb unaided.'

The child put his hand trustingly into that of the elderly physician, and together they walked out into the entrance hall.

Annabel cast an enquiring look at David, but he motioned her to say nothing. He found his old tutor's manner with the little boy intriguing. He himself could obtain such responses from other people's children, but somehow, when his own offspring were concerned, so many other factors came into play. He knew that his own anxiety and impatience caused the child to be afraid of saying or doing something which might displease his father. He was also aware that such anxious moments produced in the boy stresses which affected his heart rate. Gibson, on the other hand, seemed able to evoke absolute trust; Ian had remained calm and obedient throughout the examination.

From the hall, the parents could hear the deep gruff tones of the physician, and the piping little voice of the four year old, carefully counting as Ian negotiated the broad staircase.

'Right you are,' declared Gibson at last. 'That will do for today.'

David and Annabel emerged from the sitting-room to find Ian standing before the doctor who sat on the second step to listen in, once again, to the defective heart.

'Good. Ah, Beaton.' He looked up as the parents approached. 'That's enough for now. Best get him back to bed.' He consulted his watch as David lifted Ian and made for Annabel's room. 'Half an hour's rest,' he called to the diminutive figure in David's arms. 'Then I am coming to hear that story you have been reading.'

Dinner had been a cheerful affair in which Gibson had regaled the family with reminiscences of his life at the University, David only becoming restive when their guest turned his attention to the period when David himself had been a student.

'Hugh, Stuart,' he said, 'surely you have preparation to do for tomorrow's lessons?'

Reluctantly, the two boys rose to their feet. They could have gone on listening to the professor all night.

'I shall want to have a proper talk with you both before I leave,' Gibson told them. 'No doubt we shall be meeting at Edinburgh one of these days.'

'Oh yes indeed, sir,' Hugh exclaimed enthusiastically. 'For myself, I cannot wait to begin my medical studies.'

Stuart remained remarkably unresponsive, Gibson noted. He found this rather strange in view of David's fatherly pride in his second son's scholastic achievements, but bade both boys a cheerful 'Good night' and seemed more than pleased when Margaret kissed him lightly on the cheek.

'Good night, Professor,' she said brightly. 'I have promised to finish my story about the seal maidens tonight. Ian will be waiting.'

The old man's eyes followed the little girl rather wistfully as she skirted the dining table and kissed her father before leaving the room, hand-in-hand with her mother.

'My God, Beaton, you are a fellow to be envied and no mistake. What an engaging little family you have. You must be a very satisfied man.'

'Annabel deserves any congratulations that are due,' David replied generously. 'Such is the life of a country practitioner, I fear that I have had little to do with their upbringing.'

'Mrs Gibson and myself were not blessed with children, I am sorry to say,' mused the older man. Seeing your Margaret makes me realise how much I have missed in not having a daughter.'

'She is certainly growing into quite a sensible young lady,' David agreed, stifling a very natural pride in his little girl. 'She will be a great help to her mother, I have no doubt.'

'You do not anticipate that she will become one of these Modern Women, then?' Gibson could see that the idea disturbed David, so he pursued it out of sheer devilment, hoping to provoke an argument. 'There is now so much pressure upon

the University to admit women to degrees, I cannot see the men holding out for much longer. Fifteen women attended classes in anatomy and physiology last session, although they have no hope of qualifying under the present arrangements.'

'It is my opinion,' said David, pompously, 'that women do not have the strength, either physically or mentally, for such an onerous profession.'

'There is no chance of Miss Margaret's becoming a physician then?' Gibson asked, provocatively. He was himself quite phlegmatic in his attitude towards women who aspired to male preserves. Why should they not take the same positions as men if they were able enough? Those female students whom he had encountered so far were often superior to the general run of medical students with whom it was his misfortune to rub shoulders. If women wanted to become doctors, or lawyers, or anything else for that matter, good luck to them!

'There will be no need for Margaret to study for a career,' David assured his guest. 'The practice is healthy enough. The boys will be able to fend for themselves once their studies are completed. There will be ample resources to keep Margaret in proper style, until such time as she marries.'

'All the boys are destined for the medical profession, I assume?' Gibson asked. He had had the distinct impression that while Hugh was an obvious enthusiast, Stuart might have other ideas.

'Hugh and Stuart are well on the way towards their entrance examinations for Watson's School,' David confirmed. 'After that, in due course, the Edinburgh Medical School would be my own choice. So far as Ian is concerned, I suppose we will have to wait and see. So much depends upon the condition of his health?'

They had come to the subject at last. Gibson stroked his beard thoughtfully for a few moments before replying.

'There is a definite murmur there, as you well know. How serious the damage is, only time will tell. At least you can be satisfied that you have taken all possible steps so far to minimise the danger.'

'And the prognosis?' David prompted him anxiously.

'The boy could live a reasonably active life, maybe for many years. There is no telling how long his heart will hold out. When it happens the going will be swift, but until then Ian may go about his life unaware of the danger.'

David's face was grey. He had anticipated just such an answer but had resisted the notion, hoping against hope that he was wrong in his diagnosis.

'What would you advise us to do?' he enquired, his mouth so dry that he could hardly speak the words.

'At first,' said his colleague kindly, 'you will be tempted to treat the boy as an invalid, to watch his every move and to worry about every little childish setback.

'I would advise you to try to ignore his condition. The body is its own indicator of trouble. When he overreaches his strength, he will feel tired and seek rest. When he feels fit, he may be able to climb mountains! What is certain is that he will need the encouragement and support of his family, in order to gain confidence in his own ability to judge the difference between these two conditions.

'Above all, avoid fuss . . . about what he wears, what the weather is, what the time of day. Let him gauge situations for himself, and make his own decisions. At the end of the day, what we seek for our loved ones is a happy and fulfilling life, whether that life be short or long. Try to see that he enjoys every minute of it!'

David knew that this was sound advice, but living by it would be a different matter. Would he be able to convince Annabel of the logic of what Gibson was advocating? He thought not.

'I appreciate what you are saying, sir,' he responded. 'I wonder if you will allow me to tell my wife in my own way? I am not sure that she is prepared for such a damning prognosis, and have no wish to alarm her unnecessarily at this time.'

'It is for you to decide, of course,' replied Gibson, 'but I would advise you not to leave her in ignorance. It would be unwise to keep this knowledge to yourself for too long.'

'What would you advise as regards immediate rehabilitation?' David queried, struggling to replace his natural concerns as a parent with the more pragmatic considerations of the physician.

'A short period of exercise each day, increasing in amount and quality as you see the boy improving. Do nothing yet to overtax him. The mental stimulation he is already receiving may continue, and as soon as he is strong enough to sustain an hour or two at his desk, get him off to school. As normal as possible, that's the secret. Now, I don't know about you, but I could do with a dram!'

David leapt to his feet, embarrassed to have neglected the needs of his companion.

'My dear fellow, how very lax of me. Will you take it with or without water?'

'Water,' replied Mr Gibson, 'is for washing!'

Both men laughed and the tension was broken, but David was unable to remove from his mind the picture of his little son, huge grin and sparkling eyes offset by tell-tale shadows tinged with blue.

'What a difference you have made to the house!' Anne McGillivray stood in the large room overlooking the sea which Elizabeth had chosen as her sitting-room. 'I remember it as such a gloomy place, smelling of lye soap and boiled cabbage!'

'Mr Ogilvie used this as his study,' explained the schoolmistress. 'It was almost filled with an immense bookcase and a solid oak desk which took up the entire window bay. It was only when I saw it with the furniture removed that I realised what a splendid withdrawing-room it would make.'

'So poor Mrs Ogilvie was confined to the other room, at the back of the house?' Anne remarked.

'Conveniently situated next-door to the kitchen.' Elizabeth grinned impishly. 'Ellen Ogilvie knew her place!'

Both women laughed, but Anne quickly showed her concern for the woman they had both known for many years.

'Do you know what has become of her?' she asked. 'There was some talk of her joining a bachelor brother in Crieff.'

'She wrote to me soon after I moved in, with a number of instructions on how things worked in the house . . . which windows should never be opened in case they would refuse to close again; where the rain comes in with a westerly gale, that sort of thing. She also furnished some advice on the management of the school. Kindly meant I am sure, but I shall ignore it. It appears that she has not gone to keep house for her brother who is indeed a bachelor but has set up her own establishment nearby, and having been left comfortably by "Dear Farquhar", is becoming a noted figure in Crieff society!'

'She was such a dragon,' Anne recalled, aware of the unpleasantness shown towards Elizabeth in her early days at Eisdalsa by Ellen Ogilvie and other gentlewomen of the parish. 'I am surprised to hear that you are now on such intimate terms!'

'It is strange,' Elizabeth told her, 'but soon after the Dominie died, and it was generally made known that I would succeed him, Ellen Ogilvie was the first to give me her congratulations. She could not have been more helpful in the arrangements for vacating the house, and made some generous offers of furniture and so on which, happily, I could refuse without embarrassment because I already had more than enough of everything myself. The fact remains that her attitude towards me changed completely. It was as though some great weight had been lifted from her!'

'I believe the word is "freedom".' Anne smiled. 'Not every wife is as unhappy at becoming a widow, as were we.'

'Suffice it to say that Ellen has begged me to keep her informed of the progress made by the school, and this I shall endeavour to do for as long as she continues to show interest.' Elizabeth rang a silver handbell which stood on a small table beside her chair.

Instantly there appeared a short, excessively thin figure, neatly attired in a black ankle-length skirt and high-necked

blouse. This sombre garb was protected by a dainty lace-trimmed apron. The girl made a neat curtsy.

'You rang, ma'am?'

'Bring in the tea please, Beatrice.' Elizabeth watched critically as her new maid retreated, closing the door behind her. Satisfied at what she had observed, she turned back to her visitor, smiling.

'I decided to employ the girl when I heard that her father will not be returning to the quarries. David considers that his health will never recover sufficiently for heavy work, since his attack of cholera. Poor Mrs Lavery is beside herself to find sufficient money to keep the family. It seemed only sensible to give at least one of the children a chance to earn a little.'

Remembering the tiny hovel which the Laverys and their family of four occupied, Anne was unable to hide her apprehension.

'Do you think it wise to bring the girl into the house?' she asked. 'Particularly when the smaller children have so recently recovered from the cholera?'

'Beatrice will be living in,' Elizabeth explained. 'She is learning to be clean in her personal habits, along with mastering her household duties. Later, I shall teach her to cook. When I am satisfied that she is a competent housekeeper, I shall find her suitable employment and take on another girl from the village to train.'

'I can understand your desire to help the girl,' said Anne, 'but have you considered the effect upon the family as a whole?'

'I am sure that Mrs Lavery will be delighted to have one less mouth to feed, and I have insisted that Beatrice's earnings are paid directly to her mother.'

'The family are little better than tinkers,' Anne commented. 'How will they receive a daughter and sister whose speech and manners are so strangely altered? How will the girl herself cope with the huge difference between her present situation and the life from which she has come?'

'I would expect anyone from her background to revel in the prospect of such a future,' Elizabeth exclaimed, quite indignant that her attempt at social improvement for Beatrice should be so questioned.

Anne could see that she would not convince Elizabeth with her argument. Only someone who had moved from one class to another could understand that feeling of isolation from old associations, while being not entirely comfortable with new ones.

She pursued another line of thought. 'With all the strains imposed upon you by your new post,' she observed, 'you must surely need the support of a properly trained servant, to manage the house?'

'We shall see,' Elizabeth replied. 'For the present, Beatrice provides all the help I need. She is a happy little soul, and quick to learn. We shall manage very well.'

At that moment there was a gentle tap on the door. Opening it, Beatrice propelled a laden tea trolley into the room, positioning it conveniently for her mistress. Then she stood back, hands clasped loosely in front, and waited while Elizabeth poured tea for her visitor. Afterwards, she handed the cup carefully to Anne.

'That will do, thank you, Beatrice.' Elizabeth smiled encouragingly at the girl. 'I will ring when we are ready for you to clear.'

'Yes, ma'am.' Again the little bob before Beatrice turned on her heel and slipped unobtrusively out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Anne remarked, 'I can hardly believe that to be the same little urchin who, many a time, has come calling at the office with messages for her father. You have done wonders with her already!'

'Would that I could help more of the children in a similar manner,' Elizabeth replied. 'Unfortunately I cannot employ all the village.'

'Perhaps more ladies of the parish might be persuaded to take on such an apprentice?' Anne suggested. Her doubts about Beatrice did not extend to the daughters of skilled

tradesmen. 'Why do you not draw up a plan and put it to the Guild?'

'Do you not think that they would consider it too much trouble to take in an untrained child? Usually only girls from well-ordered families are offered work, those who have learned at least the rudiments of correct behaviour and possess basic household skills. Children like Beatrice eat from tin bowls, use one spoon for all purposes, and have little opportunity to be really clean. She had never seen a bed made up with sheets, top and bottom, nor had she ever put a linen case on a pillow. She did not know the purpose of a tablecloth and had never handled a china cup and saucer.'

'I am sure that were you to give a talk about the problems to be encountered, and advise on dealing with them, there would be some who would be willing to follow your example. I certainly would, if I could afford to or had the space to take in such a child.' Anne lived in a typical quarry worker's cottage, with two rooms and a small closet. It was the house in which she and her husband had brought up Kirsty and Dougal, and in which she and Wee Annie now lived alone. Soon, Dougal would be returning home, and she was not sure how he was to be accommodated, let alone some other person's daughter.

'We provide lectures and apprenticeships for the boys,' Elizabeth mused. 'There is no reason why we should not engage people to come to the village to talk to the girls, even some of the women, about skills such as cheese making, spinning and the like. You know, Anne, I believe we might set up a Domestic Skills Institute here at Eisdalsa, and point the way to the proper training of young women for employment. It might improve their prospects of a worthwhile occupation and provide them with a measure of independence into the bargain!'

As she finished speaking, Elizabeth rang the bell for Beatrice to clear away the tea things.

When the trolley had been trundled back to the kitchen, Anne rose to go.

'I promised Wee Annie that I would be home before dark,' she explained. 'She is playing with a friend, but I always like

to hear her lesson for the morning, before she goes to bed.'

'Would that all the parents were as diligent as you, Anne, when it comes to following their offspring's progress in school. Katherine Logie gives excellent reports of your little girl. It looks as though we have another Kirsty on our hands.'

'There could never be another Kirsty.' Anne's tone was wistful. Then, with a cheerful smile, she kissed Elizabeth on the cheek.

'Goodbye, Anne. Do not be so long calling in the next time,' Elizabeth urged. 'It is like living in a strange country, to be off the island.'

'I hope you are not regretting your move?' ventured Anne anxiously.

'I miss being able to pop across the green to see you when there is a moment to spare,' Elizabeth replied. 'But it is necessary that I live here, beside the school. I shall soon have the house exactly as I want it, then I shall feel more settled.'

She accompanied Anne to the door, and watched as she walked off down the dusty track beside the shore. In the distance, she observed an approaching figure whom she recognised.

'Oh, dear,' she sighed. 'I would that he had left his visit for a little longer.'

She went indoors and upstairs to her bedroom, calling out to Beatrice as she did so.

'There is a gentleman coming to call, Beatrice. His name is Mr Ford. Please show him into the withdrawing-room. I shall be down directly.'

Before her mirror, Elizabeth rapidly tidied her abundance of red hair, lightly dusted her face with powder, and stood back to examine her reflection. This first visit from the School Inspector since she had taken on the role of headmistress must go without a hitch.

There was a sharp knocking on the door. She listened as Beatrice went to open it, and heard the muffled exchange. Waiting only until the maid had ushered her guest inside and made him comfortable, she walked, as calmly as she

could manage, down the stairs. On the threshold she paused, straightened her shoulders, and entered the withdrawing-room.

'Why, Mr Ford,' she exclaimed, as though taken completely by surprise. 'I had not thought to see you for another month at least. This is a pleasure!'

Ellen McDougal sat in the chimney corner where she spent most of her time as the days grew shorter. Her face was as pale as ever, but there was a faint bloom about her, a fullness which had not been there before.

Not for the first time these past few days, Katrina McDougal observed her daughter covertly, and wondered about the change in her appearance. Were Ellen an ordinary girl . . . Katrina thrust the thought aside and busied herself preparing the supper.

Ellen had felt unwell for many weeks, often retching when she first awoke and when certain smells assailed her. For the past few days, however, she had felt much better, and had begun to eat hungrily whatever her mother put before her.

The fare provided in the McDougal household was sparse enough. Plain oatcakes and milk from their single cow were supplemented by the fish which Ellen's father and brother brought home from their nightly forays. The sheep provided wool for Katrina to spin and weave into cloth. This was sold to augment the meagre income provided by the croft, and only when the animal was past lambing was a ewe killed for meat. By then, the flesh was so tough that the stew pot was the only place to cook it. Broth and bannocks were the staple diet of these people who struggled to scrape a living from the unrewarding soil of Eisdalsa.

There was one thing which had pleased Ellen, although she had said nothing to her mother about her good fortune. Since August she had seen no sign of her monthly courses. She rejoiced in the lack of pain and discomfort which these had caused her and kept her secret, lest by speaking of it she might cause them to return.

There was a sharp rapping on the cottage door. Katrina opened it to find Anne McGillivray standing there, a metal can swinging from her fingers.

'Good morning, Mrs McDougal,' she said brightly. 'I have come for the milk myself today. Wee Annie has something special to do at school. The Inspector is coming, and Miss Logie has asked some of the girls to help tidy up.'

'Why, Mrs McGillivray, it's a long time since you visited the croft. Will you come in ben?'

'For a minute only.' Anne ducked her head as she stepped into the gloom of the old thatched cottage. From the closet next-door came the warm scent of fresh milk and the more prominent odour of maturing cheeses. The smell caused Anne to recall her second reason for coming to fetch the milk.

'Mrs McDougal, your cheese is famous in the district,' she commented. 'Do you have some special recipe?'

Katrina, happy to have some adult female company for once, filled the kettle as she responded modestly to Anne's words of praise.

'Och, it is my mother's formula, just,' she replied, a blush of pleasure suffusing her shiny cheeks. 'She taught me when I was a girl.'

'Mrs McIntyre and I were speaking the other day,' Anne began tentatively, 'about the number of girls in the parish who have never received the kind of instruction which you had from your own mother.'

Mrs McDougal wiped her hands on her pinafore and came to sit beside Anne on the rough settle.

'Well,' she replied, 'the quarriers' wives have little enough milk to drink, let alone a surplus with which to make cheese.'

'That is very true,' Anne agreed. 'Which is why I suggested to Mrs McIntyre that you might be able to teach those girls who do not get the experience at home.'

'There is little point in teaching the lassies to make cheese if they never have sufficient milk to produce it for themselves,' Katrina pondered. 'For what purpose would Mrs McIntyre be wanting them taught?' she queried.

'With work in the quarries so uncertain at the moment, Mrs McIntyre is anxious to see the young people trained to earn a living by some alternative means. The boys may learn such skills as masonry, engineering and carpentry, which will equip them for work almost anywhere. The girls may have to find employment as domestic servants or dairymaids. We feel that those ladies in the community who have some particular skill which would be useful might offer a little of their time to help instruct the girls, just as some of the men help in the Technical Institute.'

Katrina said nothing at first. She looked across at her daughter who, as always on the days when the weather was too forbidding to allow her to wander along the shore, sat staring vacantly into the fire.

'I well remember, when Ellen was just a wee mite, how she would stand on a stool to help me with the baking. Many's the time I have seen her so covered in flour that nothing of her face was visible but her eyes.' She was laughing as she spoke but suddenly her mirth turned to tears. 'Oh, my poor wee baby,' she sobbed. 'Would that she had died of measles rather than be left like this!'

In an instant, Anne had her arms around the keening woman. 'There, there, Katrina,' she murmured. 'You know that you do not mean it. Why, even if she is a little slow, Ellen is a companion to you. I am sure that she tries to help in any way that she can. Believe me, it is better to have a daughter who is thus crippled than no daughter at all.'

Brought up suddenly by the poignancy of Anne's words, Katrina hurriedly wiped away her tears, using a corner of her apron.

'What can I be thinking of, whining to you who have lost so much!'

She leapt to her feet and began to busy herself with making the tea. In a few moments both women were sipping companionably at the hot, sweet beverage.

'You may tell Mrs McIntyre that I shall be very pleased to help her in any way that I can,' Katrina declared decisively.

'Maybe I can bring Ellen along to the classes. She will not learn much, but it will be good for her to mix with other young women. She has been so isolated since her illness, it cannot be good for her.'

'Mrs McIntyre will see you herself about what she would like you to do,' Anne replied. 'I feel sure that you will enjoy the experience. I have agreed to teach a little book-keeping. We shall all be the better for having such a positive objective in view.'

As she rose to go, uncomfortably conscious that she was already late for an appointment with Mr Whylie in the Company Office, Anne glanced across at Ellen who had scarcely moved during all this conversation.

'Why, Ellen,' she observed kindly, 'your complexion is one which any young lass would envy, and I do believe that you have put on a little weight. I do hope you are feeling as well as you look?'

'Yes . . . thank you . . . ma'am,' the girl stammered in reply, and returned to her examination of the red embers in the grate.

Chapter 2

'Fergus McVicar.' Douglas Brown called out the name, and the gang leader stepped forward.

'Thirty thousand Duchess, one hundred and seventy thousand sizeables, fifty thousand undersize.' Anne McGillivray read off the tally of the slates produced by McVicar's crew. 'That is a total of one hundred and eighty-seven pounds, fifteen shillings.'

Fergus signed his name in the book as Anne counted out the amount. He scooped the coins into his hat and retreated to a second table where his gang of five men waited.

The share-out was based on the contribution of each man to the combined effort of the team. Fergus divided the coins into twelve equal parts. His powderman received three parts, the two slate cutters each received two parts and the labourer one part. Fergus collected his own four shares. That left the boy.

Each of the crew now extracted what he considered a fair proportion of his wages to give to the lad, thirteen-year-old Noah Fraser. They counted into his hand a total of nine pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence, a reasonable sum for his first six months' work. He thanked them all enthusiastically and pocketed the money.

'Now then, young Noah, just you see that you take that straight home to your ma.' Fergus ruffled the boy's curly red locks in a friendly fashion and sent him on his way.

On the far side of the hut, Douglas Brown was dealing with the next crew. 'Davy MacSween.'

MacSween stepped forward and doffed his cap to Anne in cavalier fashion. He was a man in his late-twenties who rather fancied himself with the ladies. Unwilling to forgo the variety

of female companionship which the bachelor state afforded him, he had managed so far to avoid the bonds of matrimony. All females were fair game so far as Davy was concerned. He certainly fancied his chances with the Widow McGillivray.

'Good day to you, Annie,' he greeted her with what she regarded as unwelcome familiarity.

'Fifteen thousand Duchess, twenty thousand Countess, one hundred thousand sizeables and forty thousand undersize,' she chanted tonelessly, ignoring the arrogant creature. 'That makes a total of one hundred and thirty-two pounds, seven shillings and sixpence.'

MacSween stared at Anne in disbelief.

'That canna be right, missus,' he blustered. 'What about the allowance for poor ground?'

'All the allowances have been taken into account, Mr MacSween,' she assured him. 'Here, take a look for yourself.'

MacSween's crew, who had been awaiting their share-out, now advanced upon Anne in a body, agitated by their boss's angry outburst.

Douglas Brown was obliged to raise his voice to make himself heard.

'That's enough of that, MacSween,' he cried. 'Mistress McGillivray merely records slates sold and calculates the sums owing. She does not allocate the ground, nor does she keep a record of the slates made by you. Show me your record and we will compare her figures with your own!'

MacSween shuffled his feet uncomfortably, giving a sideways glance at his men, all of whom were standing by, expecting him to retaliate. As Brown suspected, MacSween, who was not one of the most efficient of bosses, had kept no record of his crew's output. He relied entirely upon the record of slates sold, as kept by Anne McGillivray.

'A ken weel what we made,' he blustered, 'an' it were mor'n what she said, right enough!'

'Unless you have a tally to show me,' Douglas Brown told him, 'I have only Mrs McGillivray's account of what was sold, and what is owing. If you have nothing more to add, move

along, MacSween. There are others waiting to be paid.'

MacSween glared defiantly at the foreman for some moments. Douglas stared back at him, unwavering. Finally it was MacSween who lowered his eyes. Turning to his men he grumbled, 'It's nae use, lads . . . might as well let it go. This kind of thing is bound to occur wi' a woman in the job!' They left the hut, arguing amongst themselves.

Anne looked rather shaken. The next man had been called, and soon she was too absorbed in the work of counting out the money to consider further MacSween and his insinuations.

Only when the last crew had gone away satisfied did Anne return to the problem.

'I do not think that I have made a mistake with MacSween's tally,' she protested to Douglas Brown. 'Each crew's sales were most meticulously recorded. There have been no complaints from anyone else.'

Brown put down his pen and stood up. He came over to her desk and held her chair while she too rose.

'If it were put to a vote, Mrs McGillivray, there is not a crew in the Company would side with MacSween against you. The truth is that he and his men have been slacking ever since the quarries reopened. No doubt they thought that there would be more compensation coming for the time when there was no production. As it is, other crews have improved their efficiency and output is as high as in the same six-month period last year.'

As he spoke, Brown opened the office door to allow Anne to precede him.

'Away hame to your dinner, Mrs McGillivray. Do not give the matter another thought.'

The foreman doffed his cap and set off in the opposite direction from Anne, who made her way towards the harbour, the worried expression still clouding her face. As she crossed the green, Wee Annie came running towards her waving a piece of paper. She was gasping by the time she reached her mother.

'It is from London, Ma,' she cried excitedly. 'Open it quickly! Is Dougie coming home?' She danced around her mother while

Anne tore open the packet and tried to read the letter as it fluttered in the wind.

'He has passed his examinations,' exclaimed Anne delightedly, 'with honours. He has won a gold medal no less!' She threw her arms around her small daughter and they clung together ecstatically. 'Wait,' she cried, 'let me read the rest . . . he is coming home . . . why, he was leaving on the day after he posted the letter.'

Wee Annie jigged up and down gleefully. 'That means that he will be on the afternoon boat tomorrow!'

'I must go and tell Mr Whylie,' Anne said thoughtfully. 'You go along home and put on the kettle. I will be back very soon.'

She watched the little girl skipping happily across the grass, calling out the good news of her brother's return to anyone she happened to pass. It was good to see her child so cheerful again. It seemed a long time since either of them had had anything to be happy about. Turning around, she headed back towards the engineer's residence which stood, isolated, on the far side of the harbour, overlooking the rest of the houses.

Lambing was nearly over. It had been a late spring, the winter rainfall having amply compensated for the long drought of the previous summer. Cold winds had held back the early crops and grass was slow to grow on Eilean Nam Uan, where the McDougals reared their flock. For months now, twice each week, McDougal and his son Jack had been obliged to sail across to the island with fodder for the in-lamb ewes. Now, both men had decided to camp out in a cave on the island, to be on hand during the lambing.

Katrina McDougal had not seen her husband for over a fortnight. Work on the croft kept her busy from dawn until dusk. While Ellen was able to perform simple tasks if they were allocated and explained every time, she could not be of any real assistance to her mother. Katrina was satisfied if the girl kept out of her way and took care of herself.

During the cold spell which had lasted throughout April, Ellen had continued to wear the same voluminous woollen skirts in which she had been clothed all winter. That her breasts were unusually swollen and her abdomen protruding abnormally had either gone unobserved or had been ignored, by her family, all of whom were too busy about their own affairs to notice the silent figure in the chimney corner. When she ventured abroad, it was to wander along the deserted beach or up on the headland after quarrying had ended for the day. The villagers were used to observing Ellen McDougal from afar. Even the children kept their distance, unkind rumours of the girl's association with the wee folk and even the Devil himself making them wary.

While Anne McGillivray was making her way towards William's house, and Katrina McDougal milked the single cow which McDougal had kept to carry them over the winter, Ellen, called away by some primitive instinct, returned to the cave on the shore where Peter Lugas had raped her.

The sea was rough and the wind blew chill as the girl scrambled across the rock-strewn beach. She entered the cave as water was beginning to lap around her ankles. The oncoming tide would soon reach to the far wall.

On the shelf of rock, at the far end, the winter storms had left a thick bed of laminaria, that brown straplike weed whose fronds squelch under foot. Still retaining their moisture, the rotting plants made a comfortable bed.

As Ellen mounted the shelf, the first gripping, searing, contraction overcame her. She cried out, her voice echoing and re-echoing in the enclosed space. Hugging herself, and drawing her thick woollen plaid close about her shoulders, the frightened girl crouched in a dank corner, her back to the black, cold rock.

Time passed slowly and Ellen waited, without knowing why she waited. Soon the great pain came again and she cried in agony, tearing at her undergarments to let free whatever it was which was fighting for its release.

The pains were coming more frequently now. No sooner had one subsided and she had lain back, panting with relief, when another, more terrible than the last, caused her to scream and scream.

Only the seabirds heard. They screamed back, soaring and diving around the entrance to the cave, as though they knew the secret of what was taking place within.

The pains were now almost continuous. Ellen drew up her knees to relieve the agony and found herself forced to bear down on this thing which needed so desperately to be expelled.

Suddenly it was all over. It had come sliding out with the last great push, and there it lay, pink and greasy, its tiny arms flaying the air. Angry at its undignified and precipitate entry into the world, Ellen's child filled its lungs and cried lustily.

The exhausted girl found the infant between her thighs when, at last, she looked down at the spot from whence her relief had come. Instinct again took over. She lifted the child, catching up at the same time the cord which, attached to a mess of tissue, extruded some minutes after the infant itself. Without hesitation, she bit through the cord. The small amount of bleeding from the cut end stopped almost at once. She held the child to her, like a doll, hugging it so tight that it began to protest in the only way that babies know how.

Ellen hugged and rocked the child, and soon, exhausted by the traumatic events of the past hours, mother and baby slept.

During the time that Ellen had been in the cave the tide had reached the shelf, had turned and receded to the rocks far down the beach. It was now on its way back.

Ellen slept soundly, but the baby, needing sustenance and warmth, for it lay naked in its mother's arms, began to protest. Whimperings turned into real cries and soon the screaming disturbed Ellen.

The simple girl had forgotten what had occurred earlier. She looked now, with blank eyes, upon the red, crumpled little body which protested so vehemently. She shifted to one

side, leaving the thing lying on its back in the seaweed. Arms and legs waving, the infant writhed amongst the brown fronds. No doll that Ellen had ever possessed made such a noise as this. She put her hands over her ears to keep out the sound, and stayed thus until the crying subsided. No sooner had she put down her arms than the noise began again. She picked up the creature and held it against her breast. It nuzzled in against her, tiny hands scrabbling to reach the milk which it could smell beneath her chemise. She wrapped her plaid about it, dislodging her undergarment and exposing one tight and overfull breast. The child clamped on to the enlarged nipple and began to suck, leech-like. Ellen stared down at it in horror, suspecting that it was devouring her flesh. She tore the head away, and hurled the little body with all her force, far away from her. It hit the cave wall with a dull thud. Soundlessly the tiny form slipped down the streaming rock and into the advancing waters.

Ellen, quite unaware that she had done anything wrong, and suddenly concerned that she must be home before the tide trapped her for another six hours, let herself down on to the cave floor, and waded through waist-high water to the entrance. Here she was able to scramble up the rocks which would lead her up to the footpath above.

Her clothing was soaked, but the cold water had stopped all bleeding from the birth canal, and any blood on her garments had been washed away in the sea. When she reached home, her mother was so relieved to see her, and to know that she herself would not have to go out again in search of her wandering daughter, that she said nothing about the wet clothing. She stripped the girl, threw her a warm towel to dry herself, and in moments Ellen was tucked up in the box-bed beside the kitchen fire, warm and safe.

The infant's body floated backwards and forwards as the waves surged towards the innermost recesses of the cave. Just as the tide was on the turn, one final wave, larger than the rest, lifted the tiny form up on to the shelf and deposited it

against the far wall where it became entangled in the mass of laminaria fronds piled there.

'I have made some enquiries on your behalf concerning the establishment of your Domestic Skills Classes.' Mr Ford settled back into the solidly stuffed armchair, holding his china cup with little finger extended in the accepted fashion. 'In certain very distinguished circles, I may say,' he added archly and sipped delicately and waited expectantly for Elizabeth's reaction.

'Enquiries? What kind of enquiries?' Elizabeth was unaccountably irritated by these cat and mouse games which the School Inspector chose to play at her expense. The project had nothing to do with the School Board, and certainly fell outwith the Schools Inspectorate.

'I may be in a position to obtain books for the use of your students, through the benevolence of a distinguished gentleman of business,' he explained, leaving Elizabeth in no doubt as to the extent of his own influence in the transaction.

Elizabeth had enrolled the services of both Anne McGillivray and Annabel Beaton in devising a programme of studies for the village women and girls. Their plans were well advanced with regard to suitable speakers and demonstrators, but the matter of funds for the purchase of books and other necessities had proved difficult. Families were struggling to recover after a long spell of reduced wages during and after the epidemic, when the quarries were closed. What money they could spare for educational purposes had been put aside in order to keep the children at school, and to pay for apprenticeships for the young men. The needs of women took a very low priority in such circumstances.

It had been a trying day. In addition to taking her usual classes, Elizabeth had been obliged to pursue the matter of fees owing from two crofting families, living at the head of the glen, more than three miles distant. She had also investigated

the non-attendance of a number of village children whom she suspected of having taken work in the fields. She found it hard to blame the parents for allowing their children to work while still of school age, but the law was the law, and as she had tried to explain, at some future date the ability to read and calculate might prove more important than a few extra pennies in the kitty now. When one mother had told her that those extra coins might mean the difference between her children surviving to working age or dying of starvation, she had had to withdraw. Accepting assurances that the truants would return to school as soon as they were no longer needed on the crofts, the weary schoolmistress had returned to her house anticipating a quiet evening.

When Beatrice had announced that Mr Ford was at the door and requested a few moments of her time, she had been inclined to say that she was not at home but was pleased now that she had resisted the temptation. She felt a much greater interest in her visitor when she understood the purpose of his visit.

'Please do not keep me in suspense, Mr Ford,' she urged. 'What kind of assistance do you propose?'

'You will have heard of the Coats family of Paisley, no doubt?' Mr Ford placed his empty cup on a small table at his elbow and wiped his hands carefully on the dainty napkin which had been provided. Fussily, he brushed invisible crumbs from his lapels and straightened his cravat before continuing.

'Sir Peter Coats, with whom I had the privilege to take wine during the course of my business a week ago, is disposed to grant monies for the purchase of books for working men's Literary and Scientific Societies. He was kind enough to seek my advice as to suitable recipients in the district for which I am responsible. Naturally I mentioned the Eisdalsa group, but then, in a moment of particular audacity, I ventured to suggest that some benefit should fall to the female population, and cited your own proposal as an example. Much to my surprise, Sir Peter was delighted at the prospect, and

has agreed to make an allocation of books specifically for the use of the Eisdalsa Domestic Skills Institute. If you and your associates will provide a list of suitable volumes, Sir Peter will be pleased to furnish some of them in due course.'

Elizabeth forgave the pedantic little man his irritating manner. With an exclamation of appreciation, she rose to her feet, hurried across to where he sat, and shook him vigorously by the hand.

'This is wonderful news, Mr Ford. How can I ever thank you!'

She was uncertain how the move was made, but suddenly she found that the Inspector had vacated his chair and placed her in it. He himself was down on one knee before her, and holding her hand so tightly she was hard pressed not to cry out.

'Mrs McIntyre . . . Elizabeth,' he gasped, and to her dismay proceeded to kiss first the back of her hand, then the palm and wrist. When he reached for the other hand she withdrew it hastily.

'What is this, Mr Ford?' she cried. 'Have you lost your senses?'

'Oh, yes, yes!' he exclaimed. 'Ever since the first day that I saw you, I have loved you, Elizabeth. When I realised that you had given your heart to another, I remained silent. In your widowed state, I have respected your grieving all this while, but now I can no longer hold back. You will make me the happiest man alive, Elizabeth, if you will consent to be my bride!'

Startled and annoyed, she jumped up, brushing him aside so that he lost his balance and fell in an ungainly heap.

'Mr Ford,' her tone was frosty, 'I have always respected your office, and am not unaware of the kindness and consideration which you have shown to me in your professional capacity. But in my opinion our relationship has never extended beyond the bounds of my employment. I am certain that I have not given you cause to suppose otherwise.

'I do not, nor can I, envisage a time when I will entertain any feelings for you of a personal nature. I have given my love to only one man, and although he has been taken from me in body, in spirit he is always at my side. I cannot foresee any circumstance in which I could become the wife of another.'

Moving to the window, she turned her back upon Ford, allowing him a few moments to compose himself.

The Inspector clambered to his feet, adjusted his jacket, and examined his trousers carefully for dust and creases. At last he cleared his throat noisily and spoke in the more authoritative voice to which Elizabeth was accustomed.

'Mrs McIntyre, it seems that I have spoken out of turn. Pray forgive me.'

Elizabeth moved to the fireplace and rang for Beatrice.

Almost too quickly her call was answered.

'You rang, madam?' The girl bobbed a curtsy.

'Mr Ford is leaving, Beatrice. Please fetch his hat and cane.'

Turning to the Inspector, Elizabeth smiled politely. Her voice, when she spoke, seemed to ring as though echoing in an empty hall.

'Thank you for calling, Mr Ford. No doubt we shall have the pleasure of seeing you in the school before long?'

She could not make clearer her determination that he should have no second opportunity to address her so intimately.

'Er, yes . . . of course!' he replied, rather sharply. Then, his tone softening a little, 'I am spending the night at the Castle with my cousins. Perhaps I may call at the school tomorrow to collect your list of books . . . for the Domestic Skills Institute. If you have time to consider it, that is?'

'I will give the matter some thought and try to complete the list for you. Be assured of my gratitude for your intervention with Sir Peter Coats. My colleagues will be delighted, I am sure.'

It was done. She had managed to distance herself from him without giving him any cause for offence. Had he rescinded

his offer of help with the books, just because she had slighted him, she would have been very sorry.

The School Inspector accepted his things from the waiting Beatrice. At the door he turned and addressed her for the last time.

'I trust, madam, that despite all we may remain friends? I value highly your opinion upon educational matters, and shall wish to continue to consult you in the future.'

Elizabeth nodded silently, wishing him gone.

He touched his hat, smiled weakly at the maid, and departed.

'For the life of me I cannot understand why you wish to involve yourselves in this Domestic Institute or whatever you call it!' Morag declared, accepting the teacup from her daughter-in-law. 'I would have thought that you had enough to concern yourself with, what with little Ian and the rest of the family, not to mention your work with the practice.'

'I shall only be giving two or three lectures and demonstrations, Mama,' Annabel declared. 'It is considered necessary for the women to have some simple nursing techniques. Girls wishing to become nannies or ladies' maids will need such information.'

'Do you not believe that the young women should be taught a trade, Mrs Beaton?' Anne McGillivray enquired. 'With such a doubtful future for the quarries, it may be necessary for whole families to move away and seek work elsewhere. Surely you will agree that girls trained to perform useful work are more likely to find employment?'

Morag considered this for a moment.

'Do you really believe that there is a possibility of the quarries failing?' Morag knew that Anne had a very intimate knowledge of the business of the Eisdalsa Quarrying Company. If she believed there might be a problem, then matters were coming to a pretty pass.

'I can understand the way in which Elizabeth views the prospects of her young female pupils,' she conceded. 'I am only concerned that Annabel is taking too much upon herself.'

'I do assure you, Mama, that I am fully aware of my abilities. We are all working women here, none of us is able to give very much of our time to the Institute. That is one of the exciting challenges, fitting the tasks into our normal lives.'

'Most important,' Anne added thoughtfully, 'is to find sufficient households able to employ these girls at a minimum wage during their training period . . . without exploitation, that is.'

'My experience so far,' Elizabeth intervened, 'is that those most able to pay well are the ones least willing to give the girls a decent income. I was quite shocked to find that at the Castle the housekeeper receives less than one hundred pounds a year!'

'Here we are, nearly into the twentieth century,' cried Anne, 'and even female employers are reluctant to pay their own gender a decent working wage. How can we expect men to value women's labour when our own kind refuse to do so?'

'Did I not know you all so well,' mused Morag, 'I might believe myself at a meeting of Mrs Pankhurst and those very erudite daughters of hers!'

'I have thought,' Elizabeth broached a subject close to her heart, 'of inviting one of them to address our women, once the lecture programme is well under way. I hear tell that there is a possibility of the Pankhursts forming a league for the advancement of women's suffrage.'

'Would you join such an organisation, Elizabeth?' Morag was scandalised. 'I am sure that David would never give his permission for Annabel to do such a thing!'

Elizabeth, recalling her encounter with Mr Ford, smiled to think of the reaction of that gentleman to the suggestion that any wife of his would join the new movement. She knew that her decision to refuse him had been the correct one.

Annabel, considering that Morag had received sufficient shocks for one day, refrained from saying what she thought about the matter. The fact was, if an opportunity should arise

for her to participate in any activity which encouraged women to seek their independence, she would embrace it with open arms!

'Kirsty began the battle, so far as this community is concerned,' said Anne quietly. 'I am determined that, when the time comes, Wee Annie shall be in a position to choose her own future, whether that be a career like Kirsty, or marriage, or both.'

'Education is the door by which our sex will achieve its rightful place in society,' declared Elizabeth solemnly. Then, seeing their smirking faces, 'And not just because I have a vested interest in recruiting large numbers of fee-paying female pupils!' she added, laughing.

'Was it not Mr Pankhurst who steered the Married Women's Property Act through Parliament?' Morag enquired. 'Now that was a very sound move. At least those women fortunate enough to have money of their own may now use it as they wish, and not forgo ownership upon marriage.'

'Yes,' agreed Anne. 'It would be pointless to provide the opportunity for women to be employed in a man's world, only for them to be forced to relinquish their earnings to their husbands!'

'What it will ensure,' said Elizabeth thoughtfully, 'is that women of means will no longer be exploited by unscrupulous men who wish to marry them only for their fortune. There is nothing so detestable as a marriage based upon the bride's holdings on the Stock Exchange!'

Morag kept silent during the ensuing conversation. Until now, she had given little thought to her own mortality and had made no preparations either for her death or for the disposition of the small amount of property which she owned. She thought she knew her son well enough to be sure that David would never countenance advanced education for his only daughter. Well, it was in her power to overcome that prejudice. She was in a position to see that her granddaughter had the freedom to choose between marriage and a career. Margaret would have her independence!

Annabel's maid appeared, carrying a small visiting card upon a silver tray. The hostess scanned the writing and announced with delight, 'Michael Brown has called to see his sister. He begs to pay his respects to the company. What say you? You will all remember him, of course.'

The ladies gave vent to exclamations of pleasure. It was some years since any of them had seen the young doctor who had been the first of the quarry workers' children to benefit from the Marquis's bursaries.

'Ask Dr Brown to come through, Daisy.'

'He has his children with him, madam,' Daisy McGovan hastened to add.

'The children too, Daisy,' Annabel ordered, and nodded gratefully to Elizabeth who made a move to collect up the discarded tea things.

'Dr Brown, Master James Brown and Miss Heather Brown, madam.' Daisy made a neat curtsy and stood back to allow Michael to enter.

He had filled out considerably since Annabel had last seen him. Morag too found it hard to recognise in him the scrawny lad whom her husband had encouraged, so long ago, by giving him an apprenticeship.

'Dr Brown,' exclaimed Annabel, rising to greet him. 'What a pleasant surprise.' She took his hand in a friendly gesture and steered him through the introductions.

'Mrs Beaton, your servant, ma'am.' Michael greeted Morag with the respect and affection due to the woman who had been to him like a mother during his apprenticeship. 'You look exceedingly well, if I may say so.'

'It must be the change of air,' laughed Morag.

'My mother-in-law has moved into a house on Eisdalsa Island,' Annabel explained hastily, in response to his puzzled expression. 'You will remember Mrs McGillivray, of course.'

Michael took Anne's hand. 'I heard about your daughter, ma'am,' he murmured. 'My condolences.'

'It has been a sad time for so many families, Dr Brown,' Anne replied. 'You would have known Kirsty, of course.'

'Oh, yes, I remember her very well, a bright sparky little girl. And how is Dougal? He and I were great friends when we were boys.'

'He has just returned home having obtained a degree in Mining Engineering,' Anne told him. 'He hopes to remain here now, if Mr Whylie can find a place for him.'

'Since I am staying the night with my father,' said Michael, 'I will make a point of seeking him out!'

'Mrs McIntyre you know, of course . . . she is now the headmistress of the combined schools.'

'I am pleased to hear it, ma'am,' said Michael. 'The school was much improved by your coming. I was sorry to hear of Mr Ogilvie's demise, but I am sure that the village children will benefit far more from the new regime.'

Elizabeth found herself blushing. This direct young man was incapable of meaningless flattery. She marvelled at the new confidence in his manner, presuming it to be attributable to his work and marriage.

'And what of Mrs Brown? Have you not brought your wife to meet us also?' Elizabeth asked.

His manner changed abruptly, and Elizabeth noticed how his daughter clung even more tightly to her father's hand.

'I fear that Mrs Brown is somewhat indisposed, Mrs McIntyre. She rarely leaves her room these days.' He looked down at his little girl, but made no further comment. If his wife's illness was related to the birth of this second child, then he was determined not to declare it in her presence.

'And these are James and Heather?' Annabel crouched down to greet the two children at their own level. 'My, what a big boy . . . and how old are you, James?' she asked.

'Please, ma'am, I am nearly four years old, and my sister would like a piece of cake.'

Michael reddened at this impudence, but Annabel merely laughed.

'Would she indeed?' she said. 'It is very kind of you to speak up for her, since she is too wee to ask for herself. Would she like a sugared bun or a piece of chocolate cake, do you think?'

'A sugared bun, if you please, ma'am. She will not get so dirty with that.'

'And what about yourself, will you also have a sugared bun?' enquired Annabel seriously.

'I believe I could manage a piece of chocolate cake without making a mess. Thank you.' The boy took a piece of the cake and sat down upon a low stool to eat it.

Heather, seeing her brother so well provided for, looked to her father for direction.

'Here, Heather,' said Morag, 'come and sit by me and I will help you with your cake.' The little girl let go her father's hand for the first time and toddled over to where Morag sat on the sofa by the window. She struggled up to sit beside the old lady and soon the pair were exchanging confidences, quite oblivious to the activity going on around them. Morag appeared to understand the child's lisping conversation, although the rest of the company could make nothing of it.

Not for the first time, Elizabeth marvelled at this remarkable affinity between the very young and the very old. There was a catch in her throat as she watched the children. It was not often these days that she allowed herself to wonder about her little son, born prematurely on the night of the storm. He would have been nearly seven years old, the same age as Margaret and Wee Annie. Would he have been as self-assured as this little fellow? She thought that he would. He would have been tall and bold, like his father . . . he might even have been a poet. Her eyes filled with tears as she recalled some of the verse that was part of Gordon's legacy to her. She took out a tiny scrap of embroidered handkerchief and blew her nose loudly.

Annabel looked up sharply. 'I do hope you are not catching cold, Elizabeth,' she said anxiously. 'You are so vulnerable, in school all day with those children, exposed to every kind of infection.'

'Not in Dr Beaton's school, surely?' exclaimed Michael in mock horror. 'I seem to remember that he was particularly concerned to see that infectious children were excluded. Is

he still engaged in his great project for medical inspections in the schools?'

Annabel smiled. 'Oh, yes,' she confirmed. 'That and an isolation hospital for the district are the items most often in his mind. How long will you be staying with your father? Will you not have an opportunity to join us for dinner one evening? Then David can tell you all about his plans himself.'

'Thank you for the invitation, Mrs Beaton. Unfortunately we are making only a flying visit,' Michael responded. 'I must leave for Dalmally tomorrow morning.

'This has been the first opportunity to visit Mairi and my father since I took up my practice in Glen Orchy. I am very anxious that the children get to know their grandfather.'

'And we are taking up time that you might be spending with your sister,' said Annabel. 'I will ring for Daisy, and she shall show you to Mairi's room.'

As Michael went to gather up his little ones, the door burst open and Margaret tumbled in. A hair ribbon straggled over her shoulder, her loose fair hair covering one eye completely. The exposed cheek was muddied and streaked with tears. She held her skirts above her knees, one of which was grazed, and pouring blood.

'Mama, Mama, Dougie Lavery chased me along the lane and I fell and hurt my knee!'

'Oh, come here and let me see.' Annabel held out her arms and the child flew into them.

'It is certainly quite a deep cut,' her mother said when she had examined the damage. 'If your father was here he might well have put a stitch in it. It looks very dirty.'

Michael gave Heather back to Morag and knelt down to look. 'Ah,' he said seriously, 'yes, it is a bad cut. Would you like me to see to it?' He looked up at Annabel, whose gratitude was plain.

'Are you sure you don't mind? It seems a great imposition, and you only here to visit your sister!' she answered.

'If we can go through to the surgery,' Michael persuaded her, 'it will take no more than a few minutes to put this right.'

'Don't worry about the children,' Morag assured him. 'I will take them to find their auntie.' She picked up Heather, who was quite willing to go with her new-found friend, and took James by the hand.

'Come along,' she said, 'we shall pay a visit to my little grandson Ian.'

In the surgery, Annabel found everything which Michael would need and stood back to watch him at work.

Talking quietly, to take Margaret's mind off what he was doing, Michael swabbed the grazed knee with carbolic solution. It stung, but Margaret, impressed by this gentle young doctor, was loath to let him think her a coward.

'One or two sutures will be needed to hold this together,' he told her. 'Have you ever had stitches before?'

She shook her head, wide-eyed with apprehension.

'You will feel no more than a sharp prick,' he told her, 'nothing like as painful as the cut itself.'

Margaret tightened her lips, and flinched only slightly as the first suture was pulled through.

Michael was impressed by the stoicism of the little girl. There were six stitches in all, and she had managed to keep still throughout the operation.

Finished at last, he gave the wound a final swabbing with the antiseptic and tied a neat bandage. He stood up, and found himself unable to resist stroking his hand over the unruly golden locks. With a piece of damp cotton he wiped the smears from her cheeks and placed a kiss on her forehead.

'There you are, little soldier.' He smiled down at her. 'When your papa removes those sutures, I hope you will keep them, to remind you of this momentous occasion.'

'Now, thank Dr Brown, Margaret, and get along to the kitchen for your tea.' Annabel hustled the child out of the surgery and began to tidy up.

'Thank you so much, Michael,' she said as she got busy. 'Do you think there will be a scar?'

'A slight one, perhaps, but then, we all suffer a few of those as we go through life.' He spoke with such feeling that Annabel looked at him enquiringly.

As though relieved to be able to unburden himself at last, Michael continued, 'You asked about my wife. She had a very hard time when Heather was born. She was so weakened by the event that she is unlikely ever to recover her full health. I fear she has but a short time to live.'

'Oh, the poor dear!' Annabel exclaimed. 'How do you manage to look after the children, and run the household? Do you have plenty of help?'

'Unfortunately a young physician with a small practice does not earn sufficient money to pay a staff of servants. I have a girl to help cook and mind the children, and the rest I do myself.' He smiled ruefully. 'Were I ever to give up doctoring, I could always hire myself out as a housekeeper!'

He laughed, but Annabel could not fail to notice the signs of strain in those tired eyes. She took the young man by the elbow, and steered him out of the surgery. From Ian's room they could hear the sound of Mairi Brown's voice, followed by peals of childish laughter.

Chapter 3

'Well, Dougal, your mother must be very proud of your achievement. You have fully justified the confidence which His Lordship has placed in you, by supporting your education.' William scanned the scroll declaring Dougal McGillivray to be a Bachelor of Science (Mining Engineering) of London University. 'A First Class Honours degree should take you anywhere in the world!'

William rolled the paper carefully, retied the pink ribbon which secured it, and handed it back to the tall, broad-shouldered young man whose fiery red hair so resembled that of Jamie McGillivray, once William's loyal colleague and trusted friend.

'I would wish to repay His Lordship by working in his own quarries for a time . . . providing work can be found for me,' Dougal added hastily.

'I am sure that is what His Lordship would expect, in normal circumstances,' William agreed. 'Unfortunately, we seem to have struck a slack period in the market for slate. What demand there is at home for slate roofing is being met more than adequately by the newly mechanised quarries in North Wales. I understand that they have gone over almost entirely to machine cutting.'

'I have seen the results,' Dougal told him. 'In my opinion, the slates are too thin to last any length of time, and the effect of such uniformity of size and smoothness is unattractive.'

'Unfortunately, when employers and charitable trusts are providing housing for the masses, aesthetics are hardly considered,' mused William. 'A waterproof covering which is cheap and easily fixed is what is required. The position here

is that we are unable to compete with the Welsh, either in terms of rate of production or price.'

'I understand that Mr Campbell of Lunga is introducing a new cutting machine,' Dougal ventured, hesitantly, knowing from what his mother had told him that William was not in favour of such a move.

'Campbell may have more money to put at risk than I am allowed,' William retorted, with astonishing bitterness. 'I have it in mind to let him make the first move. If he is successful in cutting Eisdalsa slate by mechanical means, then I shall be in a better position to propose to the stockholders that an investment in new plant is indicated. I shall await with interest the results of his experiment.'

'I suppose it would be possible to take a sample of Eisdalsa slate to Llanberis to see how well the equipment performs when pyrites crystals are present?' Dougal was thinking aloud. 'I was able to spend some weeks in Wales last winter, and made a number of good friends there. I believe that they would be willing to allow me to conduct a trial.'

'I like that idea,' William agreed, instantly recovering his usual affability. 'At present I am unable to put you on the payroll here, but there is nothing to stop me from appointing you as my agent for a special investigation into the use of the new equipment. It would most certainly be preferable to spending large amounts of money investing in equipment which proves to be useless in operation.'

They continued in this vein for some time during which William outlined the terms of his proposed contract, and Dougal suggested the manner in which he thought an approach might be made to the owners of the Llanberis quarries.

When every aspect of the venture had been examined the two men shook hands and Dougal departed. As he strode home across the green, he encountered Anne making her way towards the company office, to begin her afternoon's work on the books.

'Did you speak to Mr Whylie?' she demanded, eagerly. 'What did he say?' Her question was tinged with trepidation, because she knew only too well that sales were down, and that the Board was demanding cuts in the workforce. She had hoped that there might be an even greater necessity for a fresh engineering approach to the problems of producing cheaper slate, and that a young man, newly out of college, could provide this. Whether William Whylie, not to mention the Board of Directors, would see it in this way, she doubted.

'There is no permanent position for me here at present,' he told her, disturbed to see the distress his announcement caused, 'but I am to act on Mr Whylie's behalf in the matter of a small experiment in mechanical slate cutting. I shall be employed for a few weeks at least.'

Following Mr Gibson's visit, Annabel was pleased to find David more responsive to Ian's demands to be up and about. At first, the boy was allowed out of bed to sit by the window of his mother's little sitting-room, from where he commanded a view of the entire bay.

When this new form of entertainment began to pall, David suggested that he might walk outside on fine days and spend a little time on the grassy bank before the house. Angus the groom, eager to help the little boy for whom he had always had a particular regard, fashioned a special garden chair in which Ian could rest, warmly wrapped against the chilly westerly wind which swept the bay even in May.

The fresh air and his obvious progress filled the boy with confidence that his long ordeal was soon to end. He spoke frequently of joining his brothers and sister at school, making Annabel hear his reading, ensuring that he would not be thought a dunce in class.

Annabel was not convinced that her child was cured. She noticed the bluish tinge which formed about his lips whenever he took a few steps. She had noticed how quickly he tired after his initial eager greetings when the other children returned from school. She said nothing, not even when Morag indicated

some concern as to his rate of progress. David had assured her that Ian was recovering, and was to be encouraged to do all those things for which he felt ready.

Annabel's experience of heart complaints was limited to her observations of her own elderly relatives. She supposed that the signs and symptoms of breathlessness and languor which she observed in her son might be attributed to his youth. She regarded it as possible that the set-back he had experienced had left him weaker than his siblings, and less able to cope with the stresses of growth and development. If this were so, did it also explain why the boy's parchment white skin was so transparent that the veins showed through, looking like the branches of a tree?

While she tried to assure herself that all was well, she was not deceived by David's apparent lack of concern. There were times when she caught her husband eyeing the boy steadily, when he thought no-one else was watching. She knew that he took every opportunity to read Ian's pulse, if he could do so without arousing comment. Yet he behaved on the surface as though everything was going along splendidly. Surely, if there were something really wrong with the boy, David would have told her? Not wishing to hear her fears substantiated, she avoided discussing the issue with her husband. Thrusting aside her doubts, she willed her little son to get well.

'I shall be the Prince,' Stuart announced, defying anyone to contradict him.

'In that case, I shall be Flora McDonald,' Wee Annie declared, imagining a situation in which she might find herself alone with her hero, hiding from the enemy.

'Oh, you are always Flora,' Margaret protested. 'I hate to be on the side of the English!'

'Never mind,' Hugh instantly came to her support, 'I will be the English general and you shall be my aide.'

Margaret had to be content with that. 'Never mind,' she told herself, 'one day I shall be the one to decide who does what . . . just you wait!'

It was Saturday afternoon. The Beaton children, paying a regular visit to their grandmother, had been sent out into the May sunshine to play, with strict instructions to be back in time for tea at six o'clock. Morag's teas were renowned for their variety and quantity of baking. The table creaked with the weight of scones and meat pies, pancakes and jammy tarts. There was little likelihood that they would forget the time!

'Give us a count of one hundred,' ordered Stuart, grabbing Wee Annie by the hand, 'and see that you don't peek, Margaret.'

It was the ancient game of hide-and-seek, made into an adventure by the use of their vivid imaginations. As Wee Annie scrambled over the boulders endeavouring to keep up with her champion, she could actually imagine the sound of horses' hoofs on the cobbles and the tinkle of harness as the general's stallion threw up his head and whinnied at the proximity of the quarry. She nearly slipped on one mossy boulder, still damp after the morning's showers. Stuart turned at her cry and deftly caught her as her legs flew from under her. For a moment all thoughts were dispelled by the thrilling nearness of him. His arms about her waist, he lifted her clear of the rocks, set her down on the shingle, and towed her into the shadows at the mouth of Pirate's Cave.

'They are sure to search for us in here,' she protested, 'it is the first place they will look!'

'They will look,' agreed Stuart, 'but will they see?'

Before she had time to disagree, he had vanished into the cave, and Wee Annie was obliged to follow.

The tide was well out, the waves lapping around the distant spurs of slate rock which pointed westwards towards the horizon. The floor of the cave was quite dry. A layer of seaweed covered the fine, bluish-black sand. Into this, Annie's bare toes dug with a satisfying squelch. There was little chance that their footprints would reveal the presence of the fugitives.

She looked back to the entrance, and noticed a single large print left by Stuart, where the sand had been swept clear by the tide. She ran back to disguise the spot with seaweed

before following him to the far end of the cave, where he was collecting a pile of brown fronds with which to cover them.

'Ugh, what's that disgusting smell?' demanded Annie, as she reached up with a further armful of the laminaria. 'I don't fancy hiding under this.'

'Probably dead fish or something,' Stuart dismissed her protest. 'Seaweed always smells awful, you should know that! Come on up, quickly, they'll be here any minute.'

The two children stretched out on the rocky shelf, piling the seaweed over them until no vestige of pantaloon or petticoat showed where they lay.

They could hear the footsteps of their pursuers as they scrunched across the shingle near the mouth of the cave. Annie could scarcely breathe, so intent was she upon ensuring that she would not be the one to give away her hero's hiding place. Cold air played over a part of her leg not obscured by the weed. Stealthily, she reached down to grab a handful of the slippery fronds to disguise her white skin. Her hand touched something firm and round. It was not hard like a stone, but rather felt soft and downy. Her hand played over the surface of the strange ball and her fingers encountered indents and then a small protuberance. Could it be a nose? It must be a doll that some child had left behind. Once Hugh and Margaret had gone about their search, she would have a proper look.

The two seekers stood in the mouth of the cave and their shadows fell on the glistening walls.

'Can you see anything?' Margaret asked, peering into the gloom.

Hugh walked in a few yards, stared hard at the shelf at the back, and tried to perceive either movement or a tell-tale portion of white clothing. He put his fingers to his lips, and both he and Margaret held their breaths and listened. They heard nothing but the distant murmur of the waves on the shingle.

'They're not in here,' Hugh decided. 'Never thought they would be.'

He turned away, ushering Margaret before him as they

left the shelter of the cave, and emerged blinking into the sunlight.

'Come on,' Hugh decided. 'Stuart likes to climb. Perhaps they have gone up the cliff to the top path.'

He started the ascent, finding first one foothold, then another. After a moment he turned to give his sister a hand up. That was when the screaming began.

Margaret jumped back on to the shingle in alarm, and Hugh slithered down the rock face to join her. As they began running towards the cave, from whence the noise issued, Stuart burst out on to the beach, dragging Wee Annie by the hand.

The little girl had stopped screaming but was now sobbing loudly and shivering uncontrollably. In between sobs she repeated over and over, 'I thought it was a doll . . . it looked just like a doll!'

Hugh immediately took charge of the situation. Whatever else had occurred, Annie had clearly received a severe shock. The boy slipped off his jacket and threw it across her shoulders. Putting his arm firmly around her, he persuaded her to move out of the shadows at the cave mouth into the warm sunshine.

When at last Annie was comfortably settled on a boulder and the shivering and crying had ceased, Hugh turned to his brother for an explanation.

'What happened?' he demanded.

Stuart shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know,' he replied. 'We were hiding on the ledge of rock at the far end, covered up by the seaweed. It was a good place,' he asserted. 'You didn't spot us, did you?'

'But why is Annie so upset? What did you do to her?' The older boy was annoyed at his brother's apparent indifference to the little girl's distress.

'I didn't do anything,' Stuart protested indignantly. 'We were huddled up under the weed, waiting until we were sure that you two had gone, when suddenly Annie found something tangled up in the stuff, and started screaming. She nearly fell off the ledge, and would have hurt herself if I hadn't caught

hold of her. She just stood there and kept on screaming . . . she seemed unable to run, so I had to pull her out after me. She keeps going on about a doll. I didn't see any doll.'

Hugh was torn between his concern for Wee Annie, and his curiosity to find out what had caused her distress.

'Margaret,' he instructed his sister, 'you are to stay here with Annie. Stuart and I will go back into the cave and see what we can find.'

'I'm not too certain I want to go back,' Stuart objected. In truth, the sounds of Annie's cries had unnerved him, and he was more frightened of whatever it was she had seen than he cared to admit.

'I shall go in alone then.' Disregarding Margaret's warning remonstrance, Hugh made his way to the entrance in the rocks. Without his jacket, he found the atmosphere chilling and dank. He shivered, hesitating for an instant before plunging into the gloom. After a few moments, his eyes became accustomed to the feeble light, and he could see the outline of the rock-shelf in the depths of the cave. Cautiously he advanced towards it, and as he did so, caught a glimpse of something small and white lying on the dark brown fronds. It looked, as Annie had described, like the hand and forearm of a doll.

Carefully, he lifted the fronds of weed in which the object had become entangled, and uncovered first the head, then the second arm, and finally the entire body of a tiny child. After days of regular immersions in seawater, the corpse was washed clean and appeared bloodless. The pathetic little form had been cushioned by soft weed, and except for a dark area on the left side of the skull, it appeared to be undamaged, if a little bloated. He knew the child was dead, yet without hesitation he performed the rituals which he had observed when his father first encountered a new patient. He felt for a pulse, he listened at the tiny chest for any slight sound of a heartbeat, and, finally, he dragged from his trouser pocket the small steel army issue mirror which his Uncle John had sent him from India. He placed the polished surface close to the purple lips. There was no sign of misting.

Hugh had never witnessed anything so sad. Fascinated by his discovery, he was unaware that Stuart, having overcome his fears, had followed him into the cave. He jumped when the younger boy spoke beside him.

'What is it, Hugh?' And then, 'Oh, cripes! It's a baby.'

'Look,' said Hugh, 'this is something serious. We must get Father here as soon as possible. Don't say any more to the girls than you have to. Get them to go back with you to Grandmother's house. Tell Mama what we have found, and if Papa is not already there with her, go and hoist the signal . . . you know how to do it?'

'Of course,' Stuart declared.

'Well, if you have any trouble, ask one of the men to help, but don't say anything about the baby, do you understand?'

'Yes,' Stuart replied warily, 'but I don't understand why all the secrecy . . . may I tell Mama at least?'

'Yes, of course, didn't I just say so?' snapped his brother irritably. 'Just don't go round the whole island blabbing about it. Pa may not want everyone to know.'

Hugh's knowledge of the process of birth stemmed from surreptitious investigations of a particular volume in his father's study, which he glanced at whenever the opportunity arose. His understanding was somewhat hazy, and inevitably distorted by the schoolboy stories which served as sex education at Eisdalsa School. He knew enough, however, to realise that a newborn infant, abandoned by its mother, was almost certainly a matter for the sheriff.

Stuart was inclined to argue further, but seeing the determined expression on the older boy's face, he retreated to the cave mouth and called out to the girls.

'Come on, you two, Hugh says we are to go to Grandmama's house.'

'But what is it?' Margaret demanded. 'What has he found?'

'Oh, nothing much.' Hugh heard his brother trying to avoid giving a straight answer. 'Like Annie said, it was just a doll.'

* * *

When the younger children had departed, Hugh went back into the cave to take a closer look at the dead infant. He smoothed down the weed surrounding it and straightened the limp limbs. He felt in his trouser pocket and drew out a slightly crumpled handkerchief. With extreme care, he wiped the little face clean. He dried each tiny limb and finally, folding the handkerchief neatly, slid it behind the baby's head. As a final gesture, he found a broader than average laminaria frond, and used it as a cover for the wasted little form.

Having completed these ritual acts of respect for the human life which had been taken, the boy left the cave and went to sit on a rock where the sun was warm, and from which he would be able to see his father approaching from the village.

Soon the sun began to slip behind the mountains of Mull, and the air became chill. Hugh shivered, regretting his generosity in sacrificing his jacket to Wee Annie.

Stuart delivered the girls to Morag's house as instructed, but finding that his mother had gone to visit Mrs McGillivray, he gave his Grandmama a hastily concocted explanation and fled away to the southern end of the island, to the mast.

Ten years before, Elizabeth McIntyre's sailor husband had erected the mast as a signalling device. By the use of naval bunting, news of any problem in the quarries could be instantly conveyed to the island of Seileach. In particular, news of an accident requiring the attention of the doctor could be relayed in minutes to Tigh na Broch.

Stuart was thrilled to be given this commission. He imagined himself upon the deck of HMS *Victory*, about to haul up Nelson's famous instructions before the battle. From a box at the foot of the mast, he extracted the flag for 'medical attention required', and bent it to the sheet, just as Tom McAllister had taught him. The flimsy piece of cloth caught as he pulled to raise it, and the ropes became hopelessly entangled.

The flag was just out of his reach. He cast around for something which would give him the extra inches he required, and saw that Peter Lugas was standing on the far

side of the old flooded quarry, watching him.

'Ahoy!' he called, still immersed in his nautical fantasy. 'Would you lend a hand here, please?'

Peter, who had spent much of the day sleeping off the indulgences of the previous evening, was in no condition to hurry. He had emerged from his uncle's house in the hope that the cool afternoon breeze would dispel the heavy fumes of rum and whisky which hung upon his breath. Soon he would be obliged to sit down at table with the Minister, and although he had slipped back into his old, feckless existence since Kirsty's death, he tried hard not to cause offence to his uncle and his cousin Mary, who were his only friends. In his pathetic way, he tried to keep up a semblance of polite behaviour in their presence, although they had ceased to be deceived by his protestations of being a reformed character.

He shuffled around the edge of the quarry while the boy waited for him impatiently. At last, when he was within speaking distance, Stuart pointed out the tangled sheets, and asked Peter to hoist him up so that he could free the flag.

Peter took in the situation through his haze of spirit fumes and lunged at the mast, making a grab at the ropes to steady himself. For a moment, Stuart feared that the ropes would snap and Lugas would go tumbling into the quarry. He stepped forward to steady his drunken companion and they hung together half wrestling, half clinging, until Stuart at last managed to pull Peter away from the treacherous edge and on to firmer ground.

'Perhaps if you would allow me to climb on to your shoulders, I could reach?' Stuart suggested.

Peter, having regained his balance, straightened up. He estimated the weight of the boy and decided he could support him.

'Oh, very well.' With slurred speech he agreed to help, and bent down to allow Stuart to climb on his back.

Stuart grasped the wavering shoulders, hauled himself up,

and managed to clasp his knees tight about Peter's head. Lugas straightened up, holding the boy's ankles to steady him, and thus the rope was untangled and the flag set free. From his perch, Stuart pulled on the sheet and gained great satisfaction from seeing the flag break out at the masthead to fly stiffly in the south westerly breeze.

He leapt down and clapped Peter on the shoulder.

'Thanks, Lugas,' he cried. 'I don't know what I would have done without your help.'

Stuart would never have used such familiar terms to any other member of the adult community. So far had Peter Lugas sunk in the eyes of the parish that even the youngest children taunted him and called out after him. Stuart felt in his pocket and extracted a penny.

'Here,' he offered it, 'buy a glass of ale with that!'

Peter made to protest as the boy turned round and set off back to Morag's house, but then he hesitated, momentarily studied the coin which lay in the palm of his hand, thrust it into his pocket, and walked away.

David approached from the upper path, but seeing Hugh waiting on the beach below, he scrambled down the steep rock-face to land beside the boy.

'Are you all right, Hugh?' He surveyed his son anxiously. Back at Morag's house he had, at Annabel's insistence, paused to examine Wee Annie. The child was clearly very shocked by what she had seen, but in no danger. He reassured his wife that she had done all that was necessary for the girl, then demanded of Stuart where Hugh was waiting. When his younger son had suggested that he should go with his father, the doctor waved the offer aside.

'You will stay here with your mother and sister,' he commanded. 'I am quite capable of finding my way to Pirate's Cave. I played there myself, twenty years before you were born!'

For Hugh, the last hour had seemed interminable. Without his jacket, he shivered in the breeze which grew stronger as

the sun went down. He watched the waves rippling forwards up the beach. The tide had turned some time ago; if his father did not arrive soon, the cave would become cut off.

He heard a sound from above and looked up to see a shower of slates and small stones come tumbling down the cliff.

Carrying his small leather medical bag in one hand and Hugh's jacket, which Annabel had handed to him before he left Morag's house, in the other, David made an ungainly descent of the scree-strewn cliff face and landed at last on the beach.

'Oh, Pa!' When he saw his father, the boy began to weep with relief that he could at last hand over his responsibility. 'I tried to do what I thought you would expect of me . . .'

Wordlessly, David handed the jacket to his son and helped him to struggle into it.

'Show me what you have found,' he ordered, not unkindly, as soon as the boy had composed himself.

Hugh led his father to the cave mouth, making his way nimbly across the boulder-strewn beach. David, with considerably less agility, lumbered after him.

At the entrance, Hugh waited for his father to catch up. The ground here was smooth sand, washed clear of pebbles and weed by the eddying currents.

Hugh was reluctant to be the first to go in. David understood what it was costing the boy to return to the unhappy scene. He squeezed Hugh's shoulder encouragingly before stepping inside himself, and waiting until his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom.

David acknowledged the effort which his son was making to appear calm.

'Are you all right?' he asked solicitously. Then, more firmly, 'You will have to show me what you found.' He indicated the wavelets rippling around their feet. 'We do not have much time before the tide rises.'

Hugh steeled himself and pushed past his father. 'In here,' he said, 'right at the back.'

David followed his receding figure until they reached the shelf of rock.

'It's just over here, Pa. I covered it up. It seemed the decent thing to do.'

David stared down at the tiny form, cradled in seaweed. He noted the handkerchief, and understood Hugh's need to do something, anything, to dignify the poor dead creature.

Without touching the body, David viewed it from every angle, noted the condition of the skin and the discoloration on the side of the skull. He began to talk, apparently to himself.

'There is no rigor, therefore death must have occurred a day or so ago. The corpse has not been totally immersed for long, it is not so bloated as one would expect had the baby drowned.'

He lifted the tiny form and turned it face down, watching to see what fluid poured from the mouth. There was very little.

'Yes,' he murmured, 'it is as I suspected. The wound on the head was made before the body entered the water. The child was dead before it was immersed.'

He examined the severed end of the umbilicus.

'It is difficult to tell after this length of time, but I would say that the cord was bitten off, not cut. The mother was alone at the birth. There is little doubt that she murdered the baby, probably out of fear of what others might say.'

Hugh had listened, fascinated by his father's reasoning, proud that he was allowed to witness the examination. He ventured to make his own contribution.

'The body is very white,' he remarked, 'could the baby have bled so much from such a small wound?'

David eyed his son speculatively before answering. 'The impact of the cold water immediately after death would cause the blood to recede from the skin and from the extremities, and collect within the vital organs . . . just as will happen in shock, when a person turns white and even faints for lack of blood in some parts of the body. A post mortem will show us if my theory is correct.'

Hugh had put aside his apprehension, and even his feeling of sympathy for the little corpse was overshadowed by his intense interest in hearing the medical explanation. It was

only when a larger than usual wave washed over his boots that he realised that it was time they were gone.

David had brought with him an old shawl which Annabel had thrust into his bag before he left to find Hugh. He handed this to the boy to spread out so that he might lay the baby on it and wrap it up in a tight bundle.

He glanced around one last time, hoping to see some clue which might lead him to the identity of the child's mother. She would assuredly require medical attention for her state of mind, if not her body. He found nothing.

David paused for a moment, before lifting the dead child, and put his arm around his son in a gesture of tenderness such as he had never before been able to summon up for this, his first-born child.

'You have behaved in a remarkably responsible manner in all of this,' he told the boy. 'I am very proud of what you have done today, Hugh. No adult could have conducted himself more sensibly and few would have done as well.'

The boy relaxed in the warmth of his father's commendation. For a brief moment, the doctor permitted his own strength to enfold this child towards whom he had never before been able to make any demonstration of affection.

Hugh understood nothing of his father's former inhibitions. He was unaware of the sudden strong surge of love and pride which had broken through an invisible barrier of confused emotions, rooted in the past. The boy was content to accept the novelty of their closeness, and glowed with an inner warmth which dispelled all the chill apprehensions conjured up by the day's events.

'Come along,' David urged at last. 'It's time we were getting home.'

They left the shore by the beach, taking the gentle incline among the boulders, rather than assault the cliff with their sad little burden.

When they reached the main path, Hugh slipped into step beside David.

'I have been giving some thought to the future, Hugh,' his

father confided. 'Mr Gibson was quite right when he said that it was time to be considering a move towards your medical training. I am inclined to write to George Watson's, my own old school, to see if you can start there in the autumn. Mrs McIntyre tells me that your Latin and Greek are above the required standard, even if your mathematics is only average. How would you feel about leaving home? After all, you are still quite young?'

Hugh could barely speak in his excitement. Had he heard correctly? Was it just a trick of the wind?

'Really, Pa? May I really go to Edinburgh, this year?'

'I can see no reason why not,' David declared. 'I was barely twelve when I went away. If you do well in your studies, you will be ready for medical school by the time you are seventeen, and qualified at twenty-one!'

To D. Murdoch Esq.,
Procurator Fiscal
Tobermory
Tigh na Broch
Eisdalsa
Argyllshire

On 28 May, 1888, I was called to a location on Eisdalsa Island, known locally as Pirate's Cave, to examine the corpse of a baby.

The body was that of a male infant, probably no more than a few hours old.

The child was perfectly formed, and there is no apparent reason for death by any natural cause.

A contusion on the left temporal bone suggests a heavy blow to that side of the head. This was undoubtedly the cause of death.

During subsequent immersions, no water entered the lungs. I therefore rule out any suggestion that the child drowned.

I hereby certify on soul and conscience that the

unnamed male child died as the result of a severe blow to the temporal region of the cranium, soon after birth. Although the corpse subsequently suffered several immersions in sea water, there is no evidence to suggest that death was caused by drowning.

David Alexander Beaton, MB, CM, 29 May 1888

David completed his report, blotted it carefully and addressed the document before sealing it with wax. He rang for Daisy.

'Have Angus ride to the pier,' he instructed, handing her a shilling along with the letter. 'He should be able to catch the afternoon steamer. This letter must reach Tobermory today.'

The girl accepted the instructions with a quick bob and turned to go.

'Is Mrs Beaton in her sitting-room, do you know?' David called after her.

'Yes, did you want her, Doctor? I can fetch her directly.'

'No, no. You cut along and find Angus. I will go to her myself.'

David rose from his desk and went to the window. It was the end of May already, but still there was little sign of summer. Last year at this time it had already been warm and sunny for weeks. He shuddered when he remembered the consequences of that disastrous drought. Perhaps a dismal May was preferable, but he longed for some warmer days.

In Annabel's room, Ian, too, was fretting at being confined indoors, not by his health, but by the inclement weather. Yesterday he was to have accompanied the others to the island for tea with Grandmama. At the last minute, Annabel had decided that the wind was too cold for him to be out, and even though he had protested fiercely, she had insisted that he remain at home with Miss Brown.

There had been some satisfaction in having his father to himself for afternoon tea. They had been absorbed in a game of Ludo when Angus came in to announce that the doctor's flag was flying, and that he was wanted on the island.

Later in the evening the others proved to be strangely reluctant to tell him what all the excitement had been about. He determined that next time he would not be left behind, no matter how much his mother insisted!

When David came in, Annabel put down the book she had been reading aloud, and Ian looked up eagerly, welcoming the diversion.

'Finished?' Annabel knew that her husband had been putting off writing his report on the children's discovery. He had hoped that the mother might first be identified, and an explanation obtained of the baby's death. Once his report reached the procurator, there would be an official verdict of murder. If, subsequently, the mother was discovered, the inquest having been held in her absence, she would have poor prospects of clearing herself, no matter what the cause behind the unspeakable deed.

'I have sent Angus with my report to the steamer,' he told her. 'I could not delay any longer.'

Annabel disliked this aspect of her husband's duties. On a sea coast, numbers of corpses were washed up each year, all of which must be examined and reported on by her husband. She knew just how harrowing these experiences had proved for him in the past, but none had moved him as much as the discovery of this little baby.

Annabel could not help but have sympathy with the mother . . . a girl abandoned by her lover, no doubt. Unable to face the whispering of her neighbours, and the accusations of her friends, she had sought to disguise her condition and destroy the evidence of her momentary weakness.

Annabel wondered, not for the first time, what she herself would have done, alone in Glasgow without a husband, without means, and with a child to support. Fortunately David had been an honourable man. He had married her, despite the fact that his affections lay in quite another direction.

The Beaton family had rallied round. She was eternally indebted to her brother-in-law, Angus Beaton, for entertaining her during the final weeks of her pregnancy, and for

conducting that first confinement in his own home, on Mull. She had shared a very special bond with him ever since. Annabel knew that Angus was the one person to whom she would be able to turn in time of trouble.

'Still no sign of the mother, I suppose?' she asked David.

'None. I find it hard to believe that any young woman could keep her condition from the prying eyes of her neighbours in such a small community,' he commented.

'Perhaps someone has noticed something but is unwilling to expose her?' Annabel knew that David had been forced to report his finding to the sheriff, and to William Whylie. While they could trust William to keep his mouth shut, there was no telling what action the sheriff would take to trace the mother.

'I cannot believe that the woman was of sound mind,' David murmured, conscious that little Ian, although pretending to be absorbed in the book his mother had abandoned, was all attention.

Annabel, appreciating his reluctance to continue the conversation, changed the subject.

'Tidy your crayons, Ian, before you begin reading. My, what a mess you have made! I must go and see how Daisy is getting along with luncheon.'

It was twenty-four hours later that David was summoned to the McDougals' croft on Eisdalsa.

Chapter 4

It did not take David long to diagnose the cause of Ellen McDougal's raging fever. Routine examination of her heart and lungs exposed breasts still swollen with milk and areolae surrounding the nipples of that deep brown colour characteristic of a child-bearing woman.

Examination of the abdomen revealed the white streaky marks which bore witness to stretching during pregnancy. The loose, flabby nature of the abdominal wall was almost certainly due to neglect after delivery. Unconsciously David made a deprecatory sound and shook his head.

'What is it, Doctor?' Mrs McDougal asked him anxiously.

David treated Katrina McDougal to a penetrating stare. Was it possible that the girl's mother was unaware of what had occurred? He proceeded warily, reluctant to cause unnecessary distress either to the patient or her mother.

'Have you noticed anything unusual about your daughter's behaviour of late, Mrs McDougal?' he queried cautiously.

Katrina looked from her daughter to the doctor with a bewildered expression. 'I dinna ken what y're talking about,' she stammered. 'With the lambing an' all, I have no time to be watching Ellen all the day!'

'Tell me this,' he questioned her gently. 'Has Ellen had any trouble with her monthly courses?'

For a moment Katrina stared at him blankly, then, as though the light was beginning to dawn, she put her hand to her mouth and cried out in an agony of realisation, 'Oh, no! She couldna . . . How could she have? Yet I did wonder, once or twice . . .'

'You recognised signs of her condition, then?' David skilfully

switched into a mode of acceptance that the girl had undergone a pregnancy. Katrina followed his lead.

'She did not mention about the courses, but she has always been so irregular, an' being so busy, I didna think anything of it.' The distraught woman wrung her hands, recalling those suspicions which she had experienced when she had contemplated her daughter in a rare moment of recreation. The weight of her responsibilities for the croft and the stock had quickly put her worries out of her mind. Now she remembered them all, and cursed herself for her lack of attention.

'Your daughter has undoubtedly gone through a pregnancy and has delivered a child, full-term, according to the indications.' David had examined the vagina, had noted the condition of the cervix and was satisfied that his diagnosis was correct. The girl had given birth within the last few days.

'But where . . . ?' The full horror of the situation was now clear to Katrina.

'The body of a newborn infant was found yesterday in a cave, along the shore,' David told her. Fearing that the entire story would be too much for this poor woman to bear, he refrained from giving the details of the child's death.

'Oh, the poor wee thing,' Katrina moaned, placing her arm around the unconscious Ellen and burying her head in the unruly curls which clung in damp strands to the girl's forehead and tumbled over the striped ticking of the pillow.

'For the moment, Mrs McDougal, I must attend to Ellen,' David went on. 'She is suffering from post-partum fever, possibly due to some fragments of afterbirth remaining in the womb. I shall endeavour to remove them.'

A woman such as Katrina McDougal, who had spent her life rearing and caring for stock, was no stranger to the various complications of birth. Many a time she had saved an otherwise doomed ewe, requiring the very treatment which David was about to administer to her daughter. Rolling back her sleeves, she prepared to be of whatever help she could to the doctor.

With Katrina's assistance, David prepared a douche of

warm water to which he added a liberal amount of iodine, and proceeded to remove anything which might become a source of infection.

Surprisingly there were no tears in the tract, or even at the opening of the vagina. Not for the first time, David marvelled at the ease of birth experienced by women ignorant of the taboos and refinements imposed by society upon the modern mother. If only some of his wealthier patients could perform in such a relaxed manner!

'It is the material we have washed away which was causing the trouble, Mrs McDougal,' he explained to the worried mother. 'I believe that Ellen will recover from the fever quite quickly now that there is no source of infection remaining.'

David's attentions had disturbed Ellen and had caused some pain. So confused was she, however, that she merely moaned, without crying out. Now that her ordeal was over, the only sign of distress was the tears which welled in her limpid blue eyes, and brimmed over to roll down her hot cheeks. Katrina gently wiped away the tears and kissed her daughter. 'Never mind, dearie,' she whispered, 'you will be all right now.'

David wished that it were so, but dreaded the outcome now that he knew for certain who was the mother of the dead child. The infant had been murdered. The crime had already been reported, and the matter was out of his hands. Reluctant to add to Katrina's anxiety, he decided that the worst of the news should be conveyed to the girl's father.

'Where is your husband, Mrs McDougal?' he enquired.

'Away on Eilean Uan,' she volunteered, brighter now that her daughter appeared more comfortable and showed signs of recovery. 'He should be back today. He and Jack have been busy with the flock this past fortnight.'

'When he returns,' David suggested carefully, 'I think perhaps he should call in to see me at Tigh na Broch. Tell him to come as soon as he is able. There is a matter that I must discuss with him.'

Katrina looked at him suspiciously, but fearing to hear

what made the doctor sound so serious, she simply nodded her agreement.

He outlined Ellen's treatment.

'I shall leave you some crystals of boracic acid, Mrs McDougal,' he told her. 'You are to make up a solution and apply hot fomentations every four hours. Also you will administer three drops of this liquid, in water, every four hours.' He handed her a small bottle containing strychnine. 'Only three drops, mind. It is dangerous to give more than the specified dose.'

Katrina wiped her damp hands and accepted the bottle which she placed carefully on the mantelshelf.

He dispensed some crystals of salicylic acid into a paper and handed these over with the instruction: 'A few grains in water, every two hours, for the fever.'

Gratefully the woman accepted the medicines and reached for the pot in which she kept the small store of coins she reserved for such emergencies.

'What do I owe you, Doctor?' she asked. Knowing how the matter would surely end, David was unable to take money from her.

'I will see your husband, madam,' he muttered, as he prepared to leave.

With his hand on the latch, David turned to look at the girl in the bed. Her colour was much improved, and she appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He wondered for a moment whether it would not have been better to allow the fever to have taken its course. The agonies of puerperal fever were nothing to the terrors which could await this pathetic little family once the sheriff acted upon his report.

Annabel waited by her sitting-room window to see when Sergeant Kinross departed. Ian hummed quietly to himself as he coloured a picture in his book.

'What colour shall I do the robe, Mama?' demanded the little boy, hoping to gain her attention. She did not answer immediately. 'Mama, what colour for the robe?'

She turned to him distractedly. 'What was it, Ian dear? What was it you wanted?'

Quite exasperated, he exclaimed, 'You have been glued to that window for the past half-hour, Mama. Who is it that you are waiting for?'

'I am just watching to see when Papa's visitor leaves, Ian. I wish to speak with Papa myself.'

'Can you not go and speak to him now, and get it over with?' Petulantly the child insisted upon her attention. 'You still have not told me what colour!'

Annabel came to look at the religious tract in which Ian was colouring pictures of Christ and his disciples, with camels and donkeys and women fetching water from a well.

'I believe the robe should be brown,' she told him. 'What a fine job you have done with the donkey, he is quite lifelike. Try not to go over the edges. Use the crayon more lightly.'

She stooped to show him again how to hold the crayon to give an even covering of colour. Stubbornly he took it back from her, and continued to scribble away as though she had not spoken.

'If you will not heed what I say,' she complained, 'you will never learn to do it properly. When you go to school, Mrs McIntyre will expect you to do as you are told.'

Ian, looking a little shamefaced, proceeded to hold the pencil as she had suggested and stopped the scribbling. So keen was he to begin school with the others, that Annabel had found such threats a useful weapon when the boy was at his most obstreperous.

'How long will it be before I can go to school, Mama?' he pleaded again.

'You will go in August when the others return after the summer holidays.' She was weary of telling him, and longed for the day when the school would close for six weeks so that the older children would be on hand to entertain their young brother, and so that their daily departures would no longer be the cue for Ian to begin his incessant pleas to join them.

She turned back to the window just in time to observe

the sergeant mounting his horse in the yard. With his riding crop he gave David a salute before taking the back road up the brae, towards the mainland.

When David came in through the rear door, Annabel was waiting to accost him.

'Well?' she demanded.

'Well, what?' was the doctor's response.

'You know very well,' she replied, exasperated. 'Have you told him that Ellen was the mother?'

'Naturally.' David pushed past her, making for the sanctuary of his study, reluctant to listen to another tirade about his behaviour in regard to the murder of Ellen's baby.

Annabel was not to be put off. She followed him, closing the door behind her to ensure that they were not overheard.

'How could you?' she began. 'I would never have believed that you had it in you to be so cruel.'

By explaining all the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the dead child, and the whereabouts of the mother, to the sergeant, David had finally discharged his responsibility in the unhappy affair, and had felt much relieved. As Annabel continued to upbraid him, however, he lost his temper.

'What would you have me do, madam?' he cried angrily. 'Do you suppose that I could have hidden the discovery of a dead child? Is the murder of an innocent baby of less consequence than that of a grown man? Remember, this was no stillborn infant, but a well-formed, well-nourished human being, with every prospect of survival to adult life.'

'But to disclose the name of the mother . . .' she began.

'I have done no more than is my duty, Annabel. If you do not understand that, then I can only wonder at your stupidity. I have a reputation to uphold for impeccable honesty and reliability. If you set no store upon that, then think of your children and their future prospects, and then tell me that I should have ignored the Law and pretended ignorance of the facts!'

He stormed out of the room, slamming the outer door to the surgery behind him.

It was the very worst encounter that Annabel had had with

her husband. His anger frightened her so much that she found she was trembling and faint. To steady herself she went to the sideboard and poured a large brandy. The strong spirit stung her throat, but soon she felt the comforting warmth which it brought, and the leaden weight in her bosom began to lift. She poured a second drink, and sat down to wait for his return.

David strode out for a mile or more, along the raised beach below the cliffs where the crofters farmed their individual riggs. As his temper cooled, his pace slackened. He began to think rationally once more.

In truth, he had been horrified at the indifference of the sergeant to the plight of Ellen McDougal. Despite his entreaties on the girl's behalf, the officer had insisted that she would have to be charged with murder. Even now, he was on his way to obtain a warrant for her arrest.

David had explained that the girl was incapable of knowing that she had committed any crime. The sergeant had pointed out that if there was a plea of diminished responsibility, it was for the judges to make allowance. There was no doubt that the crime of murder had been committed, but in the circumstances, he considered it unlikely that the girl would hang.

When pressed further as to the likely outcome of the trial, the sergeant had shrugged his shoulders. 'If, as you say, Doctor, the girl is incapable of understanding the difference between right and wrong, then there is little point in punishing her. In all probability she will be given a reprieve, on appeal.'

David had been relieved at these words. He could at least carry a small message of hope to the McDougals when he next called upon them.

Annabel's attitude was not unreasonable, when he thought about it. She spoke as a mother. Any woman would defend her offspring so, no matter what crime had been committed.

He turned round and retraced his steps, planning to take time to explain to his wife just why he had been obliged to act as he did. He was sure that she would understand.

* * *

Sheriff McFadyen was a bird-like individual. His steel-framed spectacles had slipped, and now perched precariously at the very tip of a thin, aquiline nose. David, mesmerised by the sight, waited for them to drop off. Then, at the precise moment, the bald pate fell forward, up came the skeletal fingers from beneath the folds of the black gown, and the offending glasses were pushed back, only to recommence for the umpteenth time their slow descent.

At long last, the procurator fiscal reached the end of his monologue describing the events which had brought into court the terrified Ellen, seated on the front bench between her parents.

'Call the medical officer in this case.' The sheriff assumed a more comfortable position and folded back the sleeves of his gown, while David exchanged places with the procurator fiscal.

'Your name,' demanded the clerk.

'David Alexander Beaton,' replied the doctor.

'Take the Book in your right hand and read the words on this card.'

The oath completed, David was required to give an account of the condition of the baby when he had first seen it in the cave.

'Is it not possible, Doctor, that the damage to the infant's skull was caused after death . . . by wave action perhaps?' the sheriff demanded.

'As there was no other damage to the body, I concluded that death occurred as a result of a single heavy blow to the skull. All indications were that the body then floated for a time before being washed on to the shelf of rock where it was discovered. That the length of time for immersion was short is indicated by the fact that the body was not much bloated.'

'Are you satisfied, Doctor, that this was a fully developed baby, born alive?' queried the sheriff.

'I am, sir.'

'What, in your opinion, was the cause of death?'

David hesitated for a moment as he glimpsed Mrs McDougal's eyes fixed upon him.

'It is my contention, sir, that the child died as the result of a severe blow to the temporal region, of sufficient force to dent the skull and fatally damage the brain.'

'Thank you, Dr Beaton, you may stand down, for the moment.' The sheriff leaned forward, summoning the procurator fiscal. The two men conversed rapidly for a few moments, then the clerk was sent to fetch David, who joined in the discussion.

'Dr Beaton,' McFadyen spoke so quietly that David strained to hear him, 'I am given to understand that it was your son who found the body.'

'A group of children discovered the infant, whilst playing in the cave, sir. My eldest son took charge of the situation, sending the others home to fetch me.'

'Is he competent to give evidence in this case?'

'I believe so.' David surprised even himself by the conviction with which he said the words.

'Very well.' The sheriff dismissed his consultants and declared, 'Send in the next witness. Call Master Hugh Beaton.'

In a clear soprano voice, as yet unblemished by the squeaks and strains of puberty, Hugh told how the infant had been discovered, and how he had sent for his father, having dismissed the other children.

'Did you touch the body at all?' the procurator demanded, his voice quite threatening to the young boy.

'I wiped its face clear of weed and covered it as best I could . . . to preserve decency, sir.'

'You did not yourself pick up the child and then, realising it was dead, drop it?'

David, suddenly aware of what it was that the procurator was suggesting, rose to his feet in protest. With a slight movement of the hand the procurator silenced him. Angrily, David resumed his seat.

'Before the event which we are discussing, had you ever seen a dead body, Master Beaton?' demanded the sheriff.

'No, sir,' Hugh, blissfully unaware of the direction in which McFadyen's questions were taking him, replied confidently.

'Then how did you know that the baby was dead? Might it not have been either sleeping, or perhaps unconscious through lack of food? It had clearly been abandoned by its mother, but it may not have been dead.'

'I checked all its vital signs,' declared the boy. 'There was no pulse I put my ear to the chest but could hear no heartbeat. I even placed a metal mirror before its mouth, but there was no sign of breathing. The baby was quite definitely dead.'

It was clear to everyone in the court that the sheriff was impressed by Hugh's reply. David, who had held his breath while the boy answered, now let out a long sigh of relief.

'And where, may I ask, did you learn to examine a patient for vital signs?' McFadyen felt sure that he knew the answer, but required Hugh's statement for the court records.

'I often accompany my father on his rounds,' replied the boy. 'I intend to become a medical practitioner myself, one day.'

'I am sure that you will make a very successful one.' The sheriff allowed himself a smile. 'You may stand down, young man.'

Hugh went to sit beside his father. David nodded to the boy, acknowledging his successful performance. Hugh glowed with pleasure when he felt the warm pressure of his father's hand upon his own.

'We have established without any reason for doubt that the child, whose body was discovered in a cave on Eisdalsa Island on the twenty-eighth day of May, 1888, died as a result of a blow to the temple, some time after birth. The fact that the body was subsequently immersed in sea water has made it impossible to determine the exact time of death, but this must have occurred between twelve and twenty-four hours prior to the discovery.'

The sheriff concluded his interim summary. In the court-room, only the scratching of the clerk's steel pen broke the silence.

'The second part of this enquiry is to ascertain the identity

of the victim, and throw some light upon the motive for, and manner of, his death. Recall Dr Beaton to the stand.'

David was required to describe how he had been called to the home of Ellen McDougal, his diagnosis of her fever, and the subsequent operation carried out in the presence of the girl's mother.

'Miss McDougal was suffering from bacterial infection, due to detritus left in the womb, following an unsupervised parturition,' he concluded.

'Is it possible that the child found in the cave was that borne by Miss McDougal?' The sheriff worded his question carefully. It was not his responsibility to accuse the murderer, but only to discover if there was sufficient evidence to take the matter to trial.

'Miss McDougal's child was born at a time not inconsistent with the discovery of the infant in the cave,' David agreed. 'I would, however, like to introduce a plea of mitigation on behalf of Miss McDougal. I have been her physician since her early childhood and can throw light upon the situation surrounding the birth and death of this infant.' David would have proceeded, but McFadyen interrupted hurriedly.

'Unfortunately, Doctor, this is an inquiry, not a trial. Any defence must be deferred until such time as the matter comes before the court at Inverary.' The sheriff dismissed him, and as David returned to his seat beside Hugh, recalled the procurator fiscal to give his final statement.

'It is my conclusion that on or about the twenty-eighth day of May, 1888, the infant met his death by receipt of a blow to the temporal region of the skull. It is also my belief that the mother of the said infant is Miss Ellen McDougal, residing at *an gabhail-fearainn*, Eisdalsa Island, and that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that she did, shortly after the birth of her child, strike its head upon a hard object, probably a rock, causing its death. I therefore request that the said Ellen McDougal be held in custody, until the matter shall be brought to trial.' The procurator fiscal resumed his seat.

'The case will be reported to the Lord Advocate. Let all

here present hold themselves in readiness to attend court at Inverary in due course.' Sheriff McFadyen removed his spectacles, gathered his papers and swept out of the courtroom.

This was not what David had anticipated at all. He turned to the McDougals to give some words of comfort, but the family had closed ranks about poor Ellen and were resisting attempts by the officers of the court to remove her.

He could do nothing now. Steering the bewildered Hugh from the courtroom, he looked anxiously about for a glimpse of his wife. Annabel found them, outside the building. Without a word to David, she took Hugh by the hand and made her way determinedly towards the waiting steamer. There was every chance that they could reach Seileach before nightfall, just so long as they caught the boat which was even now preparing to leave harbour.

Two weeks after the hearing at Tobermory, Hugh accompanied his father to Edinburgh, to be interviewed by the Rector of George Watson's School. He was also obliged to complete a series of entrance examination papers in English grammar, Greek, Latin and mathematics. In a general knowledge paper he was questioned on subjects as diverse as the date of the signing of the Treaty of Union, the reasons for the Disruption in the Church of Scotland, and the relationship between certain constellations in the Northern Hemisphere.

David collected his son when this ordeal was ended, and took him to a coffee-shop. Here, over a pot of the steaming beverage and a plate of cream pastries, the like of which Hugh had never before encountered, he interrogated the boy about his performance in the examination.

'I had little difficulty with the translations, Papa,' Hugh assured him, 'and the composition I think was satisfactory. But I was not so happy with the mathematics . . .' He tailed off, remembering a particular arithmetical puzzle in which he had become so bogged down that he was left with too little time to complete the whole paper.

'Did they ask you any questions of a scientific nature?'

David enquired hastily. There was no point in labouring over the boy's deficiencies at this stage.

'Some physics and astronomy, nothing I could not answer,' Hugh replied, putting behind him any apprehension about the outcome of the arithmetic examination.

'Since we have come such a distance, the Rector has agreed to send word of the result to our hotel tomorrow evening,' David announced. 'What would you like to do meanwhile, a visit to a museum perhaps?'

'Oh, Papa.' Boldly Hugh ventured to take advantage of this new, closer relationship with his father. 'Could we not call upon Mr Gibson and perhaps visit the Infirmary? He did invite us to contact him, should we ever be in Edinburgh.'

David was surprised but pleased at Hugh's eagerness to advance his medical experience. With every kind of entertainment which was normally denied him ready to hand, the boy preferred to see the hospital where, hopefully, he would pursue his medical studies.

Overjoyed at this new facet of the child he was only now beginning to know, David readily consented to leave his card at Mr Gibson's private rooms, with an invitation to dinner at their hotel the following evening.

The visit to the Infirmary presented no difficulty. David was well known by all the staff, from the hall porter who had called him out, night after night, during his obstetrics training, to the Regius Professor of Surgery himself.

As father and son strode into the great entrance hall, first one then another old acquaintance came up to shake David by the hand, to exchange a friendly reminiscence, and to greet the Beaton offspring with appropriate comments.

Hugh was intrigued to see how easily his father slipped into the atmosphere of his Alma Mater. It was as though he had never left. They were conducted around some of the wards by a doctor who had once been David's junior assistant, but who now held an important surgical appointment.

'Of course, things have changed somewhat since the old

Prof. retired,' Dr Mackintosh laughed, as he pushed open the door to the male surgical ward.

The lofty room was lit by windows which swept from floor to ceiling along the entire length of one wall. Green-glazed tiles to shoulder height gave way to clean whitewash above, presenting an atmosphere of space and airiness. The air was charged with the fresh, sharp scent of carbolic.

Patients lay in beds set well apart from one another. Linen was sparkling white. Each patient lay straight in his bed, not daring to disturb a pillow or wrinkle a coverlet, until the doctors had passed by.

David was impressed with the progress which had been made since the whole institution had adopted the Listerian approach to asepsis. He recalled the stench of the surgical wards in which he had been forced to begin his medical studies. The smell in those days had been of putrefaction, unemptied chamber pots and unwashed humanity. These patients might seem a little too regimented, but at least they stood a reasonable chance of recovery without succumbing to gangrene, or other bacterial infection.

'So, what of country practice, Beaton?' Dr Mackintosh enquired as they made their way towards the maternity ward. 'Do you not miss the challenge of surgery? Are you really content to spend your whole time administering to the sore throats and chesty coughs of a bunch of yokels?'

'There is a little more to general practice than that,' David assured him. He laughed off the remark, but could not hide his resentment at this common interpretation of his work. As they sauntered along the corridor, he described the cholera epidemic, the multitude of fractures and contusions encountered among the quarry workers, and the challenges of obstetrics in the home, without recourse to the equipment and facilities of a lying-in hospital. Ending with an account of his struggle to build an isolation hospital for the district, David left his colleague in no doubt about the energy required to be expended by a doctor in general practice.

Mackintosh drew a deep breath before remarking, 'I should

have known better than to suppose that David Beaton would end up in some backwater, without a challenge to stimulate him. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to visit your practice, and see for myself what can be done on a kitchen table!' He clapped David on the back, and they went on with the tour.

In the background, the boy listened and observed. Impressed by his father's defence of his work, Hugh salted away these arguments, determined that one day he would follow in David's footsteps.

'And what did you think of our University Hospital, young man?' Mr Gibson was in buoyant mood. Having managed to down a dozen oysters, followed by a plate of succulent roast beef, he was now able to concentrate more upon conversation and less upon his very demanding appetite.

Hugh, who was struggling with his small portion of beef, managed to swallow a particularly difficult lump of gristle and gasp politely, 'It is very impressive, sir.'

'Shall you favour us with your application for a studentship, do you suppose?'

Hugh was not sure if the old gentleman was teasing him or if his interest was sincere. Assuming the latter, the boy replied with enthusiasm.

'I shall certainly try to gain a place, sir. It will depend very much upon the outcome of yesterday's entrance examination.'

'For Watson's,' David hastened to explain. 'I was most anxious that the boy should attend my own school. I found the curriculum an excellent preparation for medical studies.'

'From my experience,' the older man agreed, 'lads who attend George Watson's Academy are often well in advance of their contemporaries from other establishments. Always providing, of course, that they have been diligent in their studies!'

Without hesitation Hugh responded, 'There is no fear that I would be a shirker, sir, were I fortunate enough to be given a place.'

David was again taken aback, not only by the determined attitude of his son, but also by his apparent ease in the presence of his elders. He must remember to congratulate Annabel on her raising of the child, for it was certain that David himself had contributed very little.

The coffee had been served in the hotel lounge and while the gentlemen enjoyed their Napoleon brandies, Hugh helped himself to the very generous allocation of chocolate creams which the waiter had placed before him with a huge wink. If David noticed this little conspiracy, he made no comment.

There was a lull in the conversation while all three digested their heavy meal and luxuriated in the sumptuous surroundings. The silence was suddenly broken by distant cries of the bell-hop announcing a communication for Dr Beaton.

David leapt to his feet, summoning the boy, while Hugh turned so deathly pale as to alarm Mr Gibson.

'What is it, lad?' he enquired. 'Are you feeling unwell? Can I get you anything?'

His solicitous enquiries were interrupted by David who had torn open the message the bell-boy had handed him and was bounding back into the coffee lounge, his face wreathed in smiles.

'By Heaven, you've done it, Hugh . . . an excellent result!' David's undisguised surprise served to confirm Gibson's view that his younger colleague had grossly underestimated Hugh's abilities.

'Why, even the dreaded arithmetic is only a few marks below the maximum!' In his excitement, David had forgotten his surroundings, and every head was turned at his announcement.

Hugh had turned from white to crimson. Now, as the full meaning of David's words dawned upon him, he allowed himself to smile. He reached to take the paper from his father.

'This is splendid news,' declared Mr Gibson. He was more than pleased that this solemn boy, whose devotion to his father had not, hitherto, been reciprocated, had proved his capability so convincingly. When he had observed the family together at

Tigh na Broch, Gibson had been convinced that some barrier lay between Hugh and his father, but whatever the cause, David appeared to have put it behind him for tonight.

'Y'know Beaton, this calls for something special.' Gibson rang the silver hand bell at his side.

'A bottle of your best Bollinger if you please, waiter,' he demanded. 'And *three* glasses!'

If Annabel recognised the change in the relationship between David and his eldest son, she made no comment. All her attention was focused upon her youngest child, who appeared to make such slow progress towards normal health.

Although David insisted that the boy was fit enough to participate in the activities of the older children, she was convinced that such excesses were too much for Ian. After every game, she examined his face for those tell-tale signs of exhaustion with which she had become all too familiar. When she protested to David at some particularly strenuous activity, he would reply, 'Let the boy try, Annabel. If he feels tired he will give up and come in to rest!'

Dissatisfied with his apparent lack of concern for her child's well-being, but fearful to ask for an explanation of his condition, Annabel transferred her dissatisfaction to her husband's behaviour in the case of Ellen McDougal.

How she wished that it had not been her children who had found the body! Hugh's testimony seemed to compound the Beaton responsibility for Ellen's predicament. No amount of rationalisation, by either David himself or Morag, would convince her that David had done nothing other than his duty in identifying the mother, and thus exposing her as a murderess.

As the summer wore on, the tension within the family became so intense that Morag sought some means by which to intervene. She wrote to her elder son, Angus, describing the difficulties in his brother's household, and suggesting that he use some excuse to invite Annabel and the younger children to stay on Mull for a short time.

Angus was quick to respond.

* * *

David scanned the letter from his brother briefly, then read it more carefully, looking for the motive for this unexpected invitation. Finally, bemused, he handed it to Annabel.

'Perhaps you can shed some light on this,' he snapped. 'Angus appears to know more about my domestic situation than I do myself!'

Annabel took the letter, and read:

My dear David,

With the children all home from school at the same time, I am sure that Annabel must be feeling the strain. While I am sure that the older boys are quite capable of entertaining themselves during the long summer days, it may be that your two little ones would enjoy new surroundings for a while.

I wonder if you would consider allowing Annabel, Margaret and Ian to pay me a visit? As you know, I am very much taken with Margaret's story writing and would be delighted to spend some time with her, and I feel sure that wee Ian is more than ready for a change of scene.

If you are agreeable, I understand that Whylie is setting out on a brief cruise on Wednesday next, and will be happy to ferry your brood across.

Please let me know by return if I am to have the pleasure of a little company for a short while . . .

Annabel laid down the letter.

'I can assure you that the invitation is as much of a surprise to me as it is to you,' she asserted. 'Nevertheless, I think the notion a very sound one. Ian is certainly in need of some diversion and you know how much Margaret dotes upon her uncle Angus. I have promised Mairi a holiday so that she may visit her brother. This would be a very convenient arrangement for all of us.'

'And who is to look after the household while you are gone, pray?' David was not in a mood to give in easily.

'Daisy is more than capable of taking care of the three of you. No doubt Hugh will wish to accompany you on your rounds, and Stuart is out all day from dawn until dusk with the fishermen. I believe you will manage very well.'

David could not avoid the suspicion that the whole thing had been planned, although he felt convinced that Annabel was genuinely as surprised as he was at Angus's invitation. Perhaps it would be a good idea for them to have some time apart. Try as he might, David had been unable to convince Annabel of the correctness of his behaviour in the McDougal affair. The trial was to take place very soon at Inverary. He hoped to have her support at that time; he felt he was going to need it.

'Oh, very well,' he conceded. 'I will write immediately, and tell Angus that you will be arriving on Wednesday.' He rose from the table, and as he brushed past her on his way to the door, laid a hand on her shoulder. 'Do not stay away too long, Annabel,' he pleaded, his voice low and throbbing with sudden passion. 'I shall miss you, every minute that you are away.'

She made no move to reject him, as she might well have done earlier. Without speaking, she gave the hand resting on her shoulder a squeeze, acknowledging his attempt at reconciliation.

He went to the door and opened it. 'We both need time to think, Annabel. Maybe things will be better between us when you return.'

Chapter 5

Margaret thought that Heaven must be much like her uncle's home. The old house which had belonged to Morag's father stood in a hollow below the awe-inspiring crags of Ben Buie. Tall pine trees protected the house from the winds which blew off the sea, while terraces and wide stone walls divided the policies into a series of small gardens, each unique in its planting, and each with its own air of mystery.

Margaret's favourite place was nearly on the shore, where yellow gorse and creamy broom vied with each other to produce the brightest and most heavily scented blooms. In high summer, the ground was covered with wild thyme; a purple carpet which sent up a rich perfume at every footfall.

Luxuriant ferns, and grey rocks splashed with brilliant green mosses and orange lichen, provided the background for an old shepherd's shed which had been reconstructed to provide a delightful little summer house.

Margaret came upon her secret spot on the first day. Realising that it would be an ideal place in which to do her writing, she resisted the temptation to show her discovery either to Ian or Mama.

Early each morning, she crept out of the house with a piece of bread and an apple for her breakfast, and carrying her precious notebook and pencils. In the summer house she conjured up those characters, good and evil, ugly and beautiful, real or fabulous, which tumbled out on to the pages from the depths of her rich imagination. She returned to the old Manse for her dinner only when the sun was high in the sky.

If Ian pleaded with her to show him where she disappeared to every day, she would distract him by cheerfully joining in

his games throughout the afternoon. Once her little brother had been packed off to bed at an early hour, she again made her way to the summer house and carried on with her writing.

Annabel, surprised by her daughter's furtiveness, expressed her concern to her brother-in-law.

'It is so unlike Margaret to neglect her little brother,' she complained. 'Do you have any idea what she is up to?'

Angus, feigning ignorance, had no doubt as to his little niece's destination, nor did he wonder what she was doing in the garden by the shore. He had watched her picking her way across the dew-soaked lawns towards the sea, and knew that she had found his den. What a good job he had had the foresight to remove all evidence of his own occupation, before she arrived. It was an excellent place for Margaret to choose for her writing.

'I will take Ian out in the boat tomorrow,' he said, 'there are saithe rising to the bait just now at the mouth of the loch. Will you not join us, Annabel?'

She, however, also felt the need for solitude.

'I think I will walk up the mountain,' she told him, 'if you are sure that Ian will not be troublesome to you?'

'I shall be pleased to have his company,' Angus assured her, but was unhappy about her proposed solitary expedition. 'On the mountain, be sure to stick to the well-worn tracks,' he warned, 'so that you can find your way back if the mists come down unexpectedly.'

Angus's housekeeper had packed a picnic luncheon for them all. Margaret could not believe her good fortune: to have the entire day to herself, without having to return at noon to waste the afternoon entertaining her brother.

She settled herself at the rough-hewn table and sorted out her pencils. Then, carefully, she unwrapped *the book*.

Only last evening, Uncle Angus had beckoned her into his study and closed the door to prevent any intrusion.

It was the first time that she had been in this room. It smelt of wax polish and old leather, combined with that familiar rich

aroma of pipe tobacco which followed her uncle wherever he went.

The tall windows were draped with a heavy brown velvet. Two walls were covered from floor to ceiling with books. Margaret had never seen so many in one place! She ran to the nearest shelves with a cry of delight and stroked the soft leather bindings, allowing her fingers to run along the gold-embossed titles. The words were often long and unfamiliar, but this did not lessen her excitement.

'Oh, Uncle Angus,' she cried, 'what a lovely room . . . and so many books! I wish I could read them all.'

'And I wish that you could stay here long enough to do so,' he declared, realising with genuine surprise that he meant it.

Margaret turned to face the opposite wall upon which were hung a number of water-colour paintings of familiar scenes of Seileach and of Eisdalsa.

'Why, there is our house,' she exclaimed, instantly recognising Tigh na Broch. 'And that is the old forge near the quay. Did you paint these, Uncle?' she demanded.

Angus nodded, delighted that his pictures should give her so much pleasure.

'I wish that I could paint like that,' the child sighed.

'Would you like me to show you how?' he queried.

'Oh, yes!' Her eyes were alight with eagerness. 'When may we begin?'

'On the very first wet day,' he promised. 'You must take every advantage of the fine weather to be out and about in the meantime. What would your father say were I to return you to him all pale and wan from too much time spent indoors? You will not be able to go to the summer house if the weather turns really wet.'

She looked up, startled.

'How did you know about my secret place?' she asked wonderingly.

'Where else would a young authoress disappear to every morning?' He grinned at her. 'It is a favourite hideaway of my own. I felt sure that you would find it.'

Margaret was unable to disguise her dismay that her special haven was not so exclusive as she had supposed. She brightened up, however, when Angus continued, 'Do not worry, you and I alone know the secret. Even your Mama is mystified as to your disappearances. I shall not give you away!'

He went to the great desk which occupied much of the centre part of the room. From one of the drawers he withdrew a book which he handed to her.

It was the size of one of Margaret's school exercise books, but with stiff cardboard covers decorated in rich reds and blues in a watered pattern. It contained many more pages than her ordinary books. The leaves of paper were heavily grained and smooth as silk.

Margaret caressed the shiny covers and carefully turned the pages, each invitingly blank.

'It's beautiful!' she exclaimed.

Angus was delighted with her reaction. He, too, found a blank page to be an irresistible challenge, and knew what she was experiencing.

'The book is for you,' he said, relishing the look of disbelief in her eyes. 'Into it you are to copy only your very best work, when you have checked your words for spelling errors, and only after you have satisfied yourself that you cannot improve upon what you have written. Do you understand?'

Margaret nodded, still stroking the precious volume.

'Perhaps, one day, you will allow me to read what you have written?'

Angus had smiled at her then, but there had been no hint of a command in his tone; he was actually suggesting that, should she wish to keep her work to herself, he would never compel her to show him. She felt suddenly confident that she could write something worthy of entry in the book, and knew that when it was ready, she would want him to read it.

By the time that Angus had rowed the boat to the mouth of the loch, the sun was high in the sky. There was scarcely

any wind and the surface of the sea was smooth as a millpond.

Ian leaned out and stared down into the clear water.

'I want to see an octopus,' he announced. Margaret had invented an octopus called George who lived in a sea cave and had many adventures amongst the sea creatures.

'We are unlikely to find one today,' Angus laughed. 'A deep sea trawl might bring one up from time to time, but you will not catch one on the end of a line!'

Ian soon forgot his disappointment in the intense business of baiting the hooks and throwing out their lines. He felt very grand, alone out here with Uncle Angus. On other rare occasions when the boys had accompanied their father on such expeditions, Ian had been an onlooker. Hugh and Stuart were always given the jobs to do. Now, Uncle Angus depended upon his help. Had he not said that he could not manage without Ian?

Soon, there were half a dozen good-sized fish in the bottom of the boat and a flock of seagulls hovered near expectantly. After lunch they were going to gut the fish, ready for Mrs McNab to cook for supper!

'I will just put out one more line,' said Angus. 'You open up the luncheon basket please, Ian, and find me a sandwich.'

He delved into the wicker interior and discovered sandwiches carefully wrapped in a snowy white cloth. He gave one to Angus, and himself munched contentedly in silence for a few moments.

Both were so engrossed in fortifying the inner man that it was some moments before either noticed that Angus's float had disappeared. There was a sudden mighty tug on the line and the little boat tipped sideways before turning to follow the hooked fish. Angus grabbed the rod and held it tightly, allowing the reel to spin. Suddenly, he stopped the reel, and the fish was brought up short on the end of the line. Again and again Angus released the reel then stopped it, each time reeling in a little more line.

So intent were the two upon the chase that neither noticed the direction in which their captive was taking them. Suddenly, Angus looked up to see the approaching breakers and knew that he must take over the oars and pull away from the shore.

He called over his shoulder to his little nephew: 'Ian, come to me. Carefully now, don't tip the boat. Grasp the rod, so . . . that's it. Sit on the thwart and brace your feet against the hull. Comfortable?'

The child, awed by the enormity of his responsibility, could only nod. Bracing himself as his uncle had instructed, he pulled the rod up so that the line was taut, and held on for dear life.

Angus was soon in control. He pulled heavily on the oars and steered the craft away from the rocks towards the centre of the loch. As the boat changed course, the fish pulled the line sideways and Ian was forced to strain in order to keep the rod in the correct position. For some minutes man and boy fought the natural forces which opposed them. When at last Angus was satisfied that they were far enough from the shore, he dropped anchor.

The fish, weary from its battle with the rod and line, seemed to be resting on the bottom.

Angus came up behind the boy and laid his hands over the child's. He released the catch and, still holding on himself, invited Ian to reel in the fish.

It struggled a little, then suddenly docile, rose to the surface. At the moment of leaving the water, the great skate made a final gesture of defiance. The two fishermen gave one more mighty heave and the fish was in the boat. It flapped its huge rays a few times and lay still.

Angus busied himself with the line before turning to congratulate his companion. Only then did he realise that the boy was in terrible distress. Half lying across the thwart, he gasped for breath, his hand to his throat. A high-pitched whining indicated the extent of his pain. He was deathly pale, his lips tinged with blue.

Angus dropped the line and reached over to grasp the boy. Laying him across his knees, with his head well back, he felt in the child's mouth for his tongue and pulled it clear of the airway. Then he began to breathe into the boy's mouth, counting steadily as he filled the little lungs, then again as he lifted his head to take in more air himself. Slowly the child's colour returned and Angus allowed him to continue breathing on his own.

At last he was able to reach into his inside pocket and produce a small phial of amyl nitrite. He crushed the fine glass between his fingers and held the life-giving astringent to the child's nose. With the next breath Ian gasped, choked a little, gasped again, and then began to breathe more freely.

Thankful for David's warning of this possibility, Angus laid the boy on the bottom of the boat among the fish, covering him with a spare sail.

Ian, wide-eyed with bewilderment, looked up at Angus as he prepared to get the craft under way.

'Are we going home, Uncle?' he asked, his disappointment patently obvious.

'Reckon so, old chap,' Angus replied. 'Mrs McNab will be waiting for these fish. We won't get any supper if we hang about out here much longer.'

'But you said you would let me help you clean the fish,' Ian protested.

'Let's get home first,' replied his uncle. His gaze wandered upwards to the mountains and he saw that the clouds were much lower than earlier in the day. 'We may be able to make it before the rain begins.'

Apparently content with this answer, Ian turned his head and rested his cheek upon the slippery carcass of the giant fish which he had caught.

'It's a lovely fish, Uncle,' he murmured. 'Won't Stuart be envious when he hears about it?'

'I should just think he will,' Angus agreed, anxiously scanning the child's face for any sign of further distress.

Ian's eyes closed, and as the little boat rode the increasing swell, he slept.

Satisfied that all was well with the child, Angus pulled steadily, steering for the jetty below his house.

Annabel followed the well-trodden path, climbing purposefully for some time until, cresting a particularly sharp rise, she found herself on a platform carpeted in fresh green heather, with gorse bushes dotted all about. Here and there, a rabbit-grazed lawn appeared amongst clumps of newly sprung bracken. Between the rocks, pink sea thrift waved in the breeze, vying with the golden lady's slipper for every little patch of exposed soil.

She took a deep breath, savouring the mixture of exotic scents, found a soft mossy seat and sat down with her back against a rock.

Far out in the loch, she could see a small boat. Was it Angus? she wondered, and let her gaze rove over the surrounding moorland towards the tiny harbour, which had been hidden from the Manse by the headland, now way below her.

When last she had spent time in this place it had been during her pregnancy, before Hugh was born. She recalled those long days when she had waited in vain for David to arrive. They had told her there was sickness in the village, but how she had resented his absence at the baby's birth.

Poor Hugh, it was not his fault that his arrival had been the cause of so much distress. It had taken her a long time to come to love her baby in a normal way. What would have become of him, had not Morag taken it upon herself to give him the attention denied him by his natural mother?

She knew that she had been to blame for the distance which had grown between herself and David. He was not responsible for the raging measles epidemic which had kept him away during her confinement, but it had been his duty to take care of the victims. There had been deaths among the children, including that of the Marquis's motherless son.

They said that Ellen McDougal had been a bright girl before she succumbed to the dread disease. David had been fighting for her life at the very time when Annabel was giving birth.

David had always kept a keen eye upon Ellen's development . . . holding himself to blame for her condition perhaps? But if that was so, how could he now denounce her as a murderess? The pathetic creature could have had no notion of what she was doing with her baby. Surely David understood that?

Duty . . . that was all he talked of. 'It was my duty to report it,' she mimicked him aloud. A sheep, grazing close to the cliff edge, raised its head and stared at her, munching stolidly.

Annabel had always found it difficult to balance the responsibilities of David's profession with the demands of family life. He had remarked upon it on one occasion when she had been particularly petulant about some incident where he had put his work before his family.

'I cannot understand how one such as yourself, who has experienced at firsthand the demands of medical practice, has indeed been trained as a hospital nurse, can be so insensitive to those demands when they interfere with family arrangements!' She could still recall him rapping out the harsh words, quietly lest the children or the servants overhear their quarrel.

How then, when David so clearly put his patients first in all things, could he now put his own reputation before the welfare of a poor sick-minded creature whose only crime was ignorance? The person to be horsewhipped was surely the man who had got her into that condition? What effort was being made to find him? she wondered. The answer, of course, was none.

Shifting her anger on to the unknown rapist, Annabel began to view David's position in the affair in quite a different light. He was, as he claimed, obliged to report the medical evidence of every suspicious death, without comment. Having

identified the child's mother, he was equally obliged to disclose her name to the authorities.

She went over in her mind the investigation by the procurator fiscal. David had been very shocked, she remembered, when the sheriff committed Ellen for trial. Had he really believed that they would let her go, because she had no responsibility for her actions? Annabel was sure of it.

Poor David, his was a difficult path to follow; so many decisions to be made, affecting so many other people.

There had been no talk of love in their early relationship; their marriage had been just one more example of David's determination to do his duty at all costs. She had been proud to be his wife, nonetheless, admiring his fierce dedication to his work, his great skill as a physician and his gentleness in dealing with his patients. Love and understanding had come later, with the birth of their other children.

She had been grateful for his offer of marriage, and for the way in which the Beaton family had made every effort to disguise her guilty secret. There had been no question of Annabel's being forced to confess her sins before the kirk session. There had been no cutty stool for her.

Was that why she had reacted so strongly to the accusations against Ellen McDougal? Was she seeing herself in the shoes of that poor creature? Might she, too, have been tempted to do away with the product of her shameless behaviour on that fateful Hogmanay, had David not been willing to stand by her?

Throughout their marriage, her husband had tried to shield her from matters which he thought might cause her pain. That was why she feared that he was hiding the truth about their son.

She knew that Ian was not making any real progress towards the robust health that her other children enjoyed. She was convinced that David was not telling her all the facts about the child's condition, and yet, to be fair, she had avoided any discussion about the subject because she feared

to hear the worst. If she demanded to know the truth, he could not refuse to enlighten her.

She felt so much better now that she had forced herself to address her problems.

Before she had left home, David had made it plain that he wanted her with him at the forthcoming trial. It was the opportunity she needed to heal the rift between them. When the time came, she would accompany him to Inverary.

She had no idea how long her deliberations had taken. Clouds covering the sun caused the air to become chill suddenly, and she shivered. Above her, the summit of Ben Luie was shrouded in mist which was rapidly descending towards her.

She stood up to get her bearings and, seeing the path by which she had climbed to the plateau, made directly for it, remembering as she did so Angus's warning.

'Stick to the well-trodden paths.'

Foolishly, she had ignored his words and left the path to reach the plateau. Now, as she made her way along what was no more than a sheep track in the heather, she found herself surrounded by a fine mist which thickened with every step she took.

She followed the indistinct path for a long time, her steps slow, for the ground was treacherous. Suddenly the track widened out, and she could no longer see the tall plants along its edge. Fearing that she would become disorientated and maybe wander over the cliff, Annabel decided to sit down and wait for the mist to clear. She pulled her flimsy shawl about her shoulders and wished fervently that she had worn something more substantial than her white muslin gown.

There was still a little food in her haversack. She nibbled on a piece of fruit-filled bannock, and hearing the gentle trickle of water nearby, discovered a tiny burn. With water and what food she had left, she could survive for a long time . . . if only it was not so cold.

* * *

Margaret spied her uncle's boat approaching the little wooden jetty which served the Manse. Hastily gathering her pencils, she wrapped her special book in the brown paper that Angus had given her, and hurried towards the house. If she could reach her bedroom before her brother returned, she would be spared the necessity of explaining where she had been all day.

She had tidied away her treasures and brushed her unruly locks by the time her uncle's voice was heard down below in the hall.

'Mrs McNab, give me a hand please with Master Ian . . . he has had a wee turn!'

Margaret ran to the head of the stairs and saw her uncle carrying Ian into his surgery, which was entered from the front hall. When she reached the door, Mrs McNab emerged and prevented her from passing.

'Now then, Miss Margaret.' The motherly woman smiled reassuringly. 'Master Ian will be just fine. Your uncle has left his fishing things in the boat. He wants you to fetch Mr Meikie and help him to bring in the catch. The doctor says that there is some very good fish for our supper!'

If her uncle was concerned about the fish, there could not be very much wrong with Ian, Margaret decided, and ran off happily to do as she was bid.

Down by the shore, she watched Meikie, the ghillie, lift out the huge ray. He was clearly impressed by the fish, whose tail reached the ground when he held it at shoulder height by its massive gills.

'This is a rare catch, Miss Margaret,' he exclaimed. 'I wonder that the master was able to land him, with just a wee boy to assist him!'

Margaret, awestruck by the magnificent creature, noted the dull film over its eyes and the fast-fading colours of its scales, and wished that it might still be swimming in the tranquil depths of the ocean.

Meikie packed the remaining fish into a creel which he handed to Margaret to sling over her shoulder. He himself

gathered up the tackle in one hand and, holding the captured prize aloft, led the way back to the house.

'I hope Mama will come back soon,' said Margaret, anxiously watching the swirling mists which were rapidly descending from the mountain tops.

'Is the lady out alone on the mountain, then?' The ghillie was clearly concerned. 'She should have come down by now. Those clouds have been threatening all afternoon.'

'Oh, dear.' Margaret, alarmed by the solemn expression on the man's face, began to panic. 'You don't suppose she could be lost, do you?'

'Now, now, missie, dinna fret yourself,' Meikie said kindly. 'I am sure that Mistress Beaton has more sense than to go wandering in the mist. If she is up there, she will just sit tight until the mist clears. Mark my words.'

He stood back from the scullery door to allow Margaret to precede him into the house. When they had cleared a space for the fish on the great scrubbed table, and Meikie had taken the fishing tackle out to the shed, Mrs McNab sat Margaret down in her own rocking-chair by the fire, and handed the little girl a hot scone, oozing with butter.

'Here, take this also.' She ladled out a cupful of fresh creamy milk which she set down beside Margaret's chair. For herself and Meikie, who had by now returned, she poured a steaming brew of tea.

When they were all three finished, Mrs McNab proceeded to gut the fish in preparation for the evening meal. Margaret stood at her elbow, watching. When it was the turn of the great ray, Meikie stopped her.

'It may be that the master will want to take a picture of the skate,' he said. 'It is a rare, fine fish, that one.'

'Be off to the surgery then, Miss Margaret,' Mrs McNab instructed. 'Ask your uncle, does he want a picture taken before I gut the fish?'

Full of remorse that she had forgotten about her little brother until now, Margaret scurried off as she had been

asked and, reaching the surgery door, tapped lightly before going in.

Ian lay on the high leather couch, his head resting on a snowy white pillow. Uncle Angus was seated beside him, holding the boy's hand lightly in his own huge paw.

At first sight, Margaret thought her brother was asleep, but at her entrance, he slowly turned his head and for a moment she saw the familiar sparkle in his eyes.

'Did you see the fish I caught, Margaret?' he asked her, in a small voice. 'Wasn't it a whopper!'

'Did you catch it yourself?' Margaret was genuinely impressed.

'Almost entirely by himself,' Angus confirmed, smiling at the flushed little face.

'Mrs McNab says, do you want a picture of the great fish before she cuts it up?' Margaret conveyed her message, all the while keeping her eye on her little brother. Whatever was the matter with him? He had not been as limp and feeble as this since he was first ill, months before.

'Oh, Uncle, could we have a picture taken?' Ian seemed to rally at the suggestion. 'Hugh and Stuart will never believe me if they do not see it with their own eyes.'

'You rest here quietly for a few minutes,' commanded Angus, 'and I will go and have a word with Meikie.' He turned to Margaret.

'Do not allow your brother to get up until I return. Tell him a story and keep him quiet.'

Margaret could hear sounds of furniture being moved about in the hallway, and the occasional exchange of views between her uncle and Mrs McNab. After some twenty minutes, Angus re-entered the surgery.

'Let me see how that pulse is now,' he demanded, taking Ian's wrist and extracting a gold hunter from his waistcoat pocket.

Both children watched his face, Margaret anxious for her brother's condition, the boy concerned that he might not have his picture taken with the fish.

'I think that will do,' pronounced the doctor, and both the little faces brightened. 'Come along, into the hall. I have set up the camera out there where the light is better.'

The entrance hall of the old Manse had been created by the erection of an iron-framed conservatory across much of the front aspect of the original stone building. Architecturally, the connoisseur might consider the extension to be out of proportion and keeping with the two-hundred-year-old house. It fulfilled its purpose as a waiting area for patients admirably, however. It also provided a light, airy place in which to sit on the wettest of days, and in which plants could be grown which would have expired in the harsh salt winds which buffeted the house for much of the year.

Angus stood his little nephew on a chair, carefully positioned with a tall fern as background. Mr Meikie was invited to stand slightly behind Ian, holding up the fish between them to display its great size.

'Margaret,' Angus summoned her, 'stand behind your brother and grasp hold of him around the waist so that he does not move. If you cover your hands with the fullness of his jacket you will not be seen.'

In truth, Angus was more concerned that the boy should not fall in a faint than that he should move as the photograph was taken. Nevertheless, he appreciated the value of this record to the wee boy, and was determined that he should have a picture as a memento.

The camera was perched on its stand on the opposite side of the hall. When he was satisfied with the composition of his subject, Angus disappeared beneath the black cloth which excluded light from the instrument.

'That is splendid,' he declared, as he viewed them all for the last time. 'Now, hold steady, everyone. Not quite so solemn, Meikie. It is a good catch, after all. Smile a little, Ian. Now . . . ready . . . hold it . . . Good!'

Everyone sighed with relief and relaxed. Meikie carried off the fish for Mrs McNab's attentions, while Angus lifted Ian

down from the chair and sat him on a wickerwork sofa to one side.

'Now that we are all set up,' he declared, 'I will take a picture of Margaret also. Who knows when I shall get another such opportunity!'

Margaret, her hair wispy from her recent visit to the shore to collect the fish, and her dress soiled by her long sojourn in the summer house, was hardly in a fit condition to be photographed.

Perversely, her uncle considered that her disordered state provided an enchanting picture. He took great care with the portrait and was to treasure the result until his dying day.

Only when Mrs McNab had carried wee Ian off to his bed, and Angus had checked him over once again, did anyone remember that Annabel should have been back long ago.

It was Margaret who reminded them.

'Do you know how far Mama intended to go up the mountain, Uncle Angus?' she enquired, when they had all returned to the kitchen to watch Mrs McNab dissecting the great ray.

'Oh, good Lord!' Angus exclaimed, 'I had forgotten. Whatever is the time?'

'The mist was down low on the hillside when we went to fetch your tackle,' Meikie told him. 'No doubt the lady had the sense to stay put until she could see her way clearly.'

'I told her to do so,' Angus confirmed. 'But nevertheless she has been out far too long. It will be getting dark in another hour.'

'Mercy me!' Mrs McNab exclaimed then. 'Here it is nearly nine o'clock at night, and Miss Margaret still not in her bed!'

'But I haven't had any supper,' Margaret protested, 'and I'm starving!'

'Just this once, Mrs McNab, Miss Margaret shall wait up a little longer,' declared the doctor. 'Meikie and I will go in search of Mistress Beaton while you two ladies prepare our meal. How will that do, Miss Margaret?'

Angus smiled down at his little niece, and she rewarded him with a glance of such warmth and appreciation that he

felt it worth every word of the rebuke which Annabel was certain to inflict upon him on her return!

Annabel sat beside the burn, not daring to move from the spot. As the mist lifted from time to time, she realised that she was nearer to the main path than she had dared to hope. She was however too unsure of the descent from the plateau to risk taking it until she could see properly. She huddled up to retain what bodily warmth remained and sang and recited to herself to pass the time. Soon even this palled and she became silent, listening intently for the least sound which would suggest a search party on its way. In time she dozed off, regaining consciousness abruptly when a seagull swerved up over the cliff edge, and unexpectedly encountering a human being, screeched obscenities.

The next moment, she thought she heard the sound of pebbles moving underfoot. Could it be . . . was there someone out there at last?

'Hullooooo,' she called. 'Help, I'm over here!'

Meikie it was who heard the call. The two men had climbed the path from the rear of the Manse, the most likely route for Annabel to have taken, and followed it up past the plateau. They had reached a particularly steep part where the cliff edge was only inches from the path.

When he saw this, for the first time Angus was fearful for Annabel's safety. What if she had come this far and had strayed over the cliff? Apparently Meikie was thinking much the same for he stopped and signalled for silence. Each man held his breath, listening for the slightest sound.

Suddenly the screech of a seabird and the flurry of its wings as the wild creature swept upwards across the face of the cliff, startled them. Angus's foot slipped, dislodging stones from the path, and had not Meikie made a grab at his employer, the doctor might well have stumbled over the edge.

As they stood, clinging together to regain their footing, the men heard a woman's cry.

'It came from below,' declared Meikie.

Angus called out in reply: 'Annabel! Hullo . . . Annabel!'

'Here! . . . I'm here!' she screamed in response.

'Stay right where you are, Mistress Beaton,' called Meikie. 'Call out every few minutes and we will follow your voice!'

Led by Annabel's cries, the two men descended the path until they reached the plateau. The sound now was to the fore. They crept forward across close-cropped turf.

Angus stumbled over a solid hump of woolliness and an indignant ewe jumped up and moved away, bleating.

'Here I am, over by the burn. Mind, don't stumble in!'

As the mist lifted a little, she came into view. Angus went to her, greatly relieved.

'How are you? Are you hurt?' he demanded. 'Had we not been otherwise engaged, we would have come looking for you much earlier. You must be perished in that flimsy gown. Here, let me give you my coat!'

Grateful for his attentions, but feeling somewhat foolish, Annabel allowed herself to be guided towards the path and downward towards the house. By the time that they had reached the grounds belonging to the Manse, the mist had cleared completely, and Annabel realised that had she waited a half-hour longer, she might have returned by herself. This knowledge only served to fuel her embarrassment. She was in no position, therefore, to reprimand her brother-in-law for allowing her daughter to stay up late, and join them for supper.

The fresh-caught fish tasted excellent, but the long day on the hills had tired her, and Annabel found herself nodding over her plate when she had finished.

Angus leant forward and put his firm hand over hers, the one which held the spoon in her pudding dish.

Winking across at Margaret, who was herself quite wide awake, he said, 'Come along, Annabel, time for bed.'

She started, embarrassed to be yet again a source of amusement, and allowed Angus to steer her off to her chamber. Margaret followed them up the stairs and, when Angus had made a discreet retreat, enjoyed the unique experience of

changing places with her mother, and helping her to prepare for bed!

It was nearly noon on the following day before Annabel emerged from her room.

Meikie had already ridden down to the village to collect the post and Angus was, even now, devouring the contents of his brother's letter.

. . . I have been summoned to attend the court at Inverary to give evidence in the case of Ellen McDougal. It will be necessary, therefore, for Annabel to return home immediately to take charge here.

May I, as in the past, call upon your good offices in caring for any emergency cases which may arise in my absence?

I enclose a note for Annabel, letting her know that I have arranged for McAllister to sail across for her on the evening tide, tomorrow.

My apologies for taking advantage of your kindness in this way. I trust that the time will come when I can repay the debt that I owe you . . .

Annabel studied her own letter, then glanced up to read the query in her brother-in-law's eyes.

'I must return at once,' she declared. 'He needs me with him, Angus. This is a very difficult time for him.'

Angus breathed out slowly, trying not to show the relief which he felt. Perhaps those hours on the mountain had done some good after all. When she had first arrived, they had spent some time discussing the cause of her quarrel with David. Angus was wise enough to express no opinion, but he had spoken of other situations of a similar nature, trying to make her understand her husband's dilemma.

Whether or not his words had had the desired effect, he would never know. Suffice it to say that the dear girl had come to her senses at last.

'David has asked me to keep an eye on his practice whilst he is away,' he told her. 'How would it be if I were to accompany you to Tigh na Broch, and stay with the children until you return?'

'Oh, Angus, would you really?' she asked, delighted. 'I am sure that Mama will be happy to come and help with the housekeeping, but she could not be expected to manage the family as well.'

'My own small practice can run itself for a day or two,' he assured her, 'and Meikie can always come over for me if there is an emergency. My services are much more likely to be needed at Eisdalsa.'

'I am so relieved,' Annabel declared. 'I could not leave Ian without knowing he was in good hands. David assures me that he is on the mend, but I cannot help but be anxious for him just the same.'

'In all the excitement last evening, I was unable to tell you about Ian's little turn yesterday,' Angus confessed. 'We landed a particularly magnificent skate, and the boy was so excited he fainted.'

Immediately, Annabel was all concern.

'I knew I should not have agreed to let him go fishing!' she asserted. 'How could I have wandered off on my own like that?' she castigated herself.

'You were not to know that the little feller would catch the biggest fish seen in this loch for many a day!' laughed Angus. 'When you see the photograph which I have spent all morning developing and printing, I am quite sure that you will agree that the child's happiness fully outweighed any minor set-back which he may have had.'

He disappeared for a few moments, returning waving a photographic print which was still damp from the developer.

The skilful posing appeared to show Ian himself holding up the giant fish. Meikie stood beside him, but there was absolutely no sign of Margaret supporting her brother.

PART IV

Chapter 1

'Call the next witness!'

It was hot in the courtroom. A bright August sun filtered through the high windows creating two shafts of dust-laden light, one of which illuminated dramatically the stern-faced judge, shrouded in his white robe with its blood red crosses on each sleeve. The second fell upon the pathetic figure in the dock.

Lord Justice Chalmers mopped his brow with a handkerchief of fine Brussels lace, and was grateful for the refreshing scent of lavender water, despite his protests to his wife that morning.

'You know what it is like in the circuit courts,' she had chided. 'These country yokels seem never to have heard of soap and water!'

Nor yet those who frequent the courtrooms of Edinburgh, His Lordship had thought to himself, but he had allowed her to ramble on without interruption. He reminded himself that he should be pleased that his wife was prepared to accompany him on the circuit. Despite her aversion to the discomforts of rural life, she took charge of the arrangements for his accommodation and his meals, thereby lessening the burden of weeks of travelling throughout Scotland. As the years passed, this part of his duties had become harder and harder to bear.

He placed his hand behind his head, lifting the heavily curled wig ever so slightly, in an attempt to gain some benefit from the cool draught created when the constable opened a door to one side of the podium. The next witness was summoned.

'Call Dr David Beaton!'

There was a stirring in the courtroom. Those members of the public who were from Eisdalsa turned to stare at Annabel, sitting pale and erect beside the shrinking figure of Katrina McDougal, who wore her dull plaid over her head to hide her face from prying glances.

At the sight of her husband, Annabel conjured up a faint smile of encouragement. David, catching her eye, nodded slightly to show that he had seen her, and took his place in the witness box.

The clerk of the court administered the oath and the procurator fiscal, as advocate for the prosecution, invited David to tell the court of the events leading to the discovery of the murdered child, and the identity of the mother.

'Is there any doubt in your mind, Dr Beaton, that the child died of an unnatural cause?' demanded the prosecutor.

'None, My Lord.' David properly addressed his reply to the judge.

'Is it your opinion that the mother of the deceased is the woman in the dock, Ellen Katrina McDougal?'

'It is, My Lord,' David's reply was accompanied by murmurings from many parts of the courtroom.

The judge's gavel brought the company to order instantly.

'From your observations at the scene of the crime, and the condition of the corpse, how soon after its birth did the child die?'

'Within a few hours.'

The procurator fiscal turned to the bench.

'I have no further questions for this witness, My Lord.'

'Very well, Mr Prosecutor. Mr Menzies?'

Campbell Menzies, QC, rose majestically to his feet for the first time. So far in the proceedings he had refrained from cross-examination of the witnesses. The straightforward account of the sheriff's officer, who had been summoned to the scene of the crime by David, and the written report of the post mortem examination, had required no further

questioning. Now, however, the great man had decided that there was work to be done . . .

Duncan McKay had returned home to Inverary in January, having completed his years of study at Edinburgh University, and his apprenticeship in the chambers of one of the most distinguished advocates of the day. The young solicitor's early promise had become somewhat dulled, as had the shiny brass plate above the door of his father's grocery store, as the months passed and so little work of any real importance came his way. There had been a few minor disputes over ownership of property, the proving of a very complicated will, which had left the beneficiaries in a state of permanent contention with each other and himself, and a few minor felonies – cases which, as a newly qualified lawyer, he was obliged to take, but for which he received no payment.

He felt himself to be a burden upon his hard-working but impecunious parents, and wished fervently that something might come his way by which he could find a footing upon the ladder towards recognition by the public, and by his professional colleagues.

The case of Ellen McDougal did not, at first sight, suggest a major improvement in Duncan's prospects. He had been summoned by the clerk of the court as being next on the list for an assignment. When he visited Ellen in the gaol, he had found his client to be incapable of coherent speech and would have despaired of making out any defence on her behalf, had it not been for the intervention of the medical officer in the case.

David Beaton had presented himself at the side door of the little grocery store in Argyll Street, a week before the trial was to begin.

'Mr McKay?' he enquired. 'Mr Duncan McKay?'

'Aye, that is my name, sir.' Duncan eyed the caller narrowly. His profession caused him often to meet strangers. Sometimes they were not the most desirable of characters.

'My name is Beaton, Dr David Beaton. I have some knowledge of your client in the affair of the infanticide on Eisdalsa Island.'

The young lawyer glanced along the street in both directions, ensuring that they were neither observed nor overheard.

'Are you not a witness for the prosecution, Dr Beaton?'

'I regret that it is so,' he replied.

'Then, by rights, you should not be having words with me, sir.'

'I understand that my presence here is irregular, Mr McKay, but as the young woman's physician since she was a small child, I possess information which should be made available to her defence.'

'You had better come inside.' With a further glance in both directions Duncan ushered the doctor into his father's hallway.

'Come this way, sir, if you please. Here is my consultation room.'

The chamber was little more than a cupboard under the eaves of the single-storeyed dwelling which served the McKays as a home as well as a place of business. A solid oak desk filled most of the space, leaving scant room for the two chairs which, except for a set of rickety shelves carrying a multitude of dusty legal tomes, comprised the remainder of the furniture.

McKay directed his visitor to the more comfortable chair, and seated himself behind the desk.

'While your approach is unconventional, Dr Beaton, I have to confess that any information about my client will be more than welcome. Apart from the testimonies of yourself and others at the sheriff's enquiry at Tobermory, I have been unable to unearth any material relevant to the defence of my client. The accused appears so shocked by her predicament that she is unable to converse with me at all, let alone tell me her own version of events.'

'That is why I am here, Mr McKay,' explained David. 'I was Miss McDougal's physician when, as a child of eight years or

so, she suffered an attack of measles of the most severe form. The fever affected her brain and she ceased to develop mentally from that date. Unfortunately her physical development was not similarly affected, with the dire consequences which have led to her present predicament.'

'Are you telling me that, in your opinion, this woman, capable of undergoing sexual intercourse and carrying a child to full term, did not know what she was doing?' Modern and sophisticated as he considered himself to be, McKay could not help but be shocked by the proposition.

'That is exactly what I mean,' David replied. 'A more enlightened society might have regarded this young woman as the victim of a cruel, unscrupulous assault, rather than be trying her for the murder of her own child.'

'Nevertheless,' McKay interposed, 'it cannot be denied that she is the most likely person to have killed the child.'

'Who is to say that the father of the child was not present at the birth, and disposed of the infant?' David knew in his heart that it was an unlikely conjecture, but the onus was upon the court to prove that, beyond all reasonable doubt, the murder was carried out by Ellen.

It was clear that McKay was unimpressed by this argument.

'Were the natural father to have intervened, it is unlikely that he would have left the evidence of the crime to be so easily discovered,' he mused. 'On the other hand, were the young woman herself in charge of her actions, would she not have taken more trouble to dispose of the body?'

Good, thought David. Now you are on the right track young man. Aloud he remarked, 'Although I must give evidence on behalf of the prosecution, is it not possible to cross-question me, in order that I may explain the girl's deficiencies? I suppose that she will not be called to the witness stand herself?'

'That would be most inappropriate,' McKay declared hastily. 'As yet I have been unable to have more than the simplest conversation with her. In the distressing atmosphere of the

courtroom, I think it would be impossible to get her to speak at all!'

David's relief was patently clear. Were Ellen to repeat in court the ramblings which he had overheard during the past weeks; odd phrases which, when pieced together, might sound like a confession . . .

'I hope I have said enough to put you on the right track, Mr McKay.' David reached for his hat and cane and rose to go.

'Yes, indeed . . . yes, Doctor. Thank you for your help.' The young lawyer rose also, in order to see his guest off the premises, then returned to the poky office and reached for his copy of *Rettie's Session Cases*. Surely, somewhere, there must be precedents for a case such as this?

It was late into the night when Duncan McKay finally laid down his pen and closed the great tome which lay open on the desk before him. He rubbed his eyes. Only one last task remained, then he could go to his bed.

He reached for a fresh sheet of paper, dipped his steel pen in the ink, and addressed a letter to his recent employer.

To Sir Campbell Menzies, QC
Royal Bank of Scotland Chambers
St Andrew's Square
Edinburgh

My Dear Sir Campbell,

I have the honour to call upon your good offices in the case of Ellen McDougal of Eisdalsa Island . . .

Duncan felt that there was sufficient justification to call upon Sir Campbell to take Ellen's case. He had little doubt that the woman had killed her child, but the circumstances were such that a plea of mitigation stood a good chance. And what a feather in his own cap should his client escape the death penalty!

* * *

'If it please the court, My Lord.' Sir Campbell Menzies rose to his feet, stretching tall and thrusting back his broad shoulders. His velvet-trimmed, full-flowing gown and snow white wig, only slightly less imposing than His Lordship's own, created a magnificent spectacle in these sombre surroundings.

'Pray proceed, Sir Campbell.' Lord Justice Chalmers nodded at his old adversary, wondering what had brought the tiresome fellow to this God-forsaken spot.

These two gentlemen, much of an age and of near equal status in their profession, had crossed swords upon many an occasion. Justice Chalmers might be excused for thinking that Menzies had taken this case as a means of getting in just one more thrust at himself! Why else would he choose to undertake such a hopeless case?

One thing was for sure, Chalmers decided. This was not going to be the simple trial it had appeared to be. If it went on for another day, he would be obliged to stay a further night in that bug-ridden inn by the loch. Lady Chalmers would not be pleased about that.

The fifteen good men and true who occupied the jury benches shuffled on their seats, their attention riveted by the splendid appearance of the counsel for the defence.

'Dr Beaton,' the QC addressed David on the witness stand, 'you say that you were called upon to attend Mistress McDougal after she had given birth. Was that the only occasion upon which you attended the accused?'

'No, sir, I have been the family physician to the McDougal household since I took up my practice in 1876.'

'You are, then, familiar with the medical history of the young woman in the dock?'

'I am.'

'Would you say that Miss McDougal was a normal, healthy adult?'

'Physically, I would say that she was quite strong, yes. Her ailments were largely those associated with childhood,' David replied cautiously. The counsel had been well briefed

by McKay. It would be a pity if David himself were to destroy the illusion that he was unaware of the direction in which the questions were leading.

'Physically, you say?' Menzies probed a little harder. 'What of her mental state?'

There was another wave of murmuring around the court-room. Those who knew Ellen realised what the defence counsel was suggesting. Jack McDougal and his father held their breaths. Katrina McDougal clasped her hands in her lap and bent her head in prayer.

'As a result of one of those same childhood illnesses,' David answered, 'during the measles epidemic of 1879, Miss McDougal suffered severe brain damage. From that time on, her mental development has been arrested, although her physical development has progressed normally.'

'Is it your professional opinion, Dr Beaton,' Menzies was looking, not at the witness, but towards the members of the jury so that his words would have greater impact, 'that the prisoner, while giving every outward appearance of being a mature adult, has retained the mind of an eight-year-old child?'

David replied to the bench. 'That is so, My Lord.'

'From your experience, Doctor, would you say that it was likely that an eight-year-old child would have the degree of carnal knowledge required to understand what was happening to her, either at the time of her impregnation, or at the birth of her child?'

There was a gasp from some quarters of the room. Even Annabel found herself blushing at the direct manner in which the counsel had addressed his question.

David replied readily.

'I am convinced, My Lord, that the young woman was an innocent in all that has befallen her, and that she has been the victim of a rape of the most dastardly kind.'

'With regard to the birth,' Menzies continued, 'is it possible that, in her ignorance, the accused might have delivered herself of the child without understanding what she was doing?'

Even the advocate himself could hardly believe what he was suggesting.

'Birth is a natural function, My Lord,' David replied, picking his words so as to cause the least offence to all present. 'All mammals perform the act of parturition in similar fashion. A hind in the forest has no access to a midwife.'

He paused to allow the more raucous comments from the assemblage to die down.

'Miss McDougal reverted to primitive instinct in biting the cord, for example,' he concluded.

The startled cries of the onlookers, variously offended or amused by David's frank answer, were sufficient to distract attention from the slight scuffle at the back of the room, when a dishevelled figure, smelling unpleasantly of spirits so early in the day, forced his way towards the door. Peter Lugas had heard enough to know that he would be wise not to be seen in the court, lest his interest should be suspected as being more than ghoulish curiosity. If he left at once, the McDougals need never know he had ever been to Inverary. First, though, he must cool his parched throat with a flaggon of ale.

The conversation in the courtroom remained subdued, despite the fact that the judge had risen and the jury departed to consider their verdict.

David dismissed from the witness box, had come to join Annabel in the body of the court. They exchanged few words, but she held his hand discreetly beneath her reticule, knowing how much he needed her strength and support at this moment.

David allowed his gaze to wander round the courtroom. He caught the eye of Alexander Lugas whose attendance had been requested by the sheriff in view of the severity of the case concerning one of Lord Stirling's tenants. The two exchanged stiff-lipped smiles of recognition.

Peter Lugas's surreptitious departure had not escaped his father's attention. The Factor wondered what interest the boy could have in this business. He dismissed, immediately, the

obvious answer to his question, but was nevertheless left with the chill foreboding that Peter was somehow implicated in the affair.

'All stand!' The clerk's clear voice interrupted his speculations.

The fifteen members of the jury shuffled into their places. Last amongst them, the chancellor or foreman shuffled his papers and cleared his throat nervously.

Lord Justice Chalmers took his position behind the great carved oak desk, and as the courtroom came to order, the clerk ceremoniously placed a red velvet cushion in front of the judge. On it lay a small square of black material. Annabel shuddered at the sight, and felt Katrina McDougal stiffen beside her.

The clerk rose to face the jury.

'Mr Chancellor,' he addressed the foreman, 'have you considered fully all matters appertaining to the case of the Crown versus Ellen Katrina McDougal?'

The chancellor, fully conscious of the importance of his role, answered with grave solemnity.

'We have, My Lord.'

'And are you satisfied, beyond reasonable doubt, that the accused committed the crime as charged?'

'We are, My Lord.' The chancellor would have continued but at this very moment Campbell Menzies rose majestically to his feet.

'If it please, Your Lordship,' he began grandly, 'I wish to put forward a special retainer on behalf of my client.'

The interruption was not unexpected in the circumstances. The Lord Justice indicated that the chancellor should resume his seat, and turned to Menzies.

'Very well, Sir Campbell, you may proceed.'

'My client wishes to change her plea to one of guilty but insane, My Lord.'

'Mr Chancellor,' the Lord Justice addressed the juryman, 'the plea has been changed as you have heard. Do you wish to reconsider your verdict?'

The chancellor looked along the rows of his compatriots. There was no sign of any dissent.

'No, My Lord,' he declared. 'The jury finds the defendant guilty of murder . . .' there was a muffled scream from Katrina McDougal . . . 'but asks for leniency, on account of the defendant's diminished responsibility.'

Lord Justice Chalmers leaned forward and took up the black cap, which he placed with practised accuracy upon the judicial wig.

Ellen, who had been allowed to sit in the dock between two warders, was pulled roughly to her feet and made to face the bench. Her head hung down. Her eyes looked blankly at the floor. It was clear to anyone who knew her that she was bewildered and disorientated in these surroundings, and had no appreciation of the drama which was being enacted around her.

'Ellen Katrina McDougal, you have been found guilty of the heinous crime of infanticide, a crime for which the only punishment is death.'

Annabel glanced sideways at David. His face was chalk white. She laid her hand comfortingly on his knee. Although he appeared not to notice her gesture, he covered her fingers with his own.

'However,' Judge Chalmers continued, 'in view of the plea for mitigation made on your behalf, I propose to exercise my right to waive the death penalty in this case.' There was audible relief amongst several of the onlookers, but also a touch of disappointment from those who had come to witness a quick hanging.

'You will be confined, for the remainder of your natural life, in an institution for the criminally insane.'

The gavel fell. The clerk called for the company to stand while the judge and his entourage left the courtroom. In the hubbub which ensued hardly anyone noticed Ellen. For a moment the look of bewilderment left her face when she recognised her parents and her brother. She smiled and lifted both hands towards them in a silent plea for help, before being led away down the stairs, to the cells below the dock.

Katrina McDougal turned to David accusingly.

'You should have let her die all those years ago!' she screamed at him. 'Why didn't you let her die?'

Why indeed? he wondered, and buried his face in his hands, filled with despair.

Jack McDougal pushed his way towards the bar. The inn was crowded by the mob of people pouring out of the courtroom. He looked around him carefully, trying to distinguish the features of the man he was seeking. Suddenly he caught sight of the familiar tousled mop of coppery-coloured hair. Restraining himself from advancing further in that direction, Ellen's brother found a position from which he could observe his quarry undetected.

Peter Lugas was several glasses of ale ahead of his companions. His departure from the courtroom, at a most tense part of the proceedings had served to convince Jack that his suspicions were not without some foundation. Most of the younger men on the island regarded Ellen rather like a pet animal, teasing her sometimes but never really being unkind to her. Only Peter Lugas had stopped the simpleton when he met her on her walks and accompanied her on her way. Only Peter Lugas took the trouble to linger when he passed by the croft, encouraging Ellen to talk, in simple terms, about the weather, the animals and the wild flowers in which she had delighted.

Ellen had been badly frightened by the children of the village; she avoided strangers, secreting herself amongst the rocks when she encountered anyone while on her walks by the shore. Who, then, would she have allowed to get close enough to rape her? Only someone she knew, and thought she could trust.

Jack finished his drink, thumped his glass loudly on the counter and called for a refill.

'And one for my friend over there!' he declared as the pot-boy hastened to serve him.

Peter raised his head when he found the brimming glass placed before him. He caught sight of his benefactor, and

for a moment Jack thought he saw a shadow of fear creep across those dissipated features.

Braving it out, Peter Lugas lifted the glass and swallowed a mouthful of ale. Jack approached him warily. He had no wish to see Lugas cut and run, now that he had him cornered.

'Very good of you . . . Jack, old man.' The Factor's son slurred his words. 'So sorry about poor Ellen. Still, she won't swing after all, I hear. Something to be thankful for, eh?'

'No, she won't swing,' Jack agreed, anger boiling within him. 'But she will be locked up until her dying day. How would you fancy that, Mr Factor's son?' he demanded threateningly. 'What if I were to go to the sheriff and tell him of your association with my sister? Do you think he might be interested to know about the times you spent with her down by the shore?'

'Just befriending a poor senseless creature, Jack, nothing more,' Peter insisted, but he could not ignore those piercing blue eyes upon him, trying to gauge the truth.

The men beside them had gone quiet, sensing the start of a fight. Some who knew Jack, and felt sorry for his tragic family, laid hands on him to restrain him from lashing out at Lugas. No sense in him being put in the lock-up for disorderly behaviour. Hadn't his poor parents enough to contend with for one day?

Seeing that Jack was in no position to molest him, Peter backed away from the bar. The friends crowded around Jack McDougal had now turned menacingly in Peter's direction. In an effort to prevent further argument, the Factor's son sidled out into the street.

There was a cool breeze coming up from the loch. He staggered down to where a group of fishing smacks were tied up alongside the quay, below the prison walls.

In his inebriated state, he was suddenly overcome by the sharpness of the evening air. He sank down upon a pile of fish nets and slept.

It was the town clock, striking twelve, which roused Peter from his drunken stupor. He shivered, attempted to stretch his numbed limbs, and cried out in pain as the muscles

returned agonisingly to life. He staggered to his feet. Where would he find a bed at this hour?

He vaguely remembered having seen the McAllisters' boat drawn up beside the quay. Perhaps he might beg a passage home? Lugas made his way unsteadily to where the boat was moored, his damp boots slipping on the slimy cobbles. A narrow board linked McAllister's vessel with the shore. In other circumstances, Peter would have made light work of boarding. Now, however, befuddled and unsteady as he was, he took only two cautious steps upon the plank, lost his footing, and tumbled head first into the loch.

Sleeping soundly in their bunks, McAllister's crew heard nothing of the one sharp cry for help. They did not see the Factor's son strike his head on a projection from the harbour wall. No one was there to watch for the body to reappear. It was a long time before that coppery head broke surface again.

David was beginning to wish that he had accepted McAllister's offer to return to Eisdalsa by sea. The road to Clachan was deeply rutted after the spring rains, and little attempt had been made to fill even the most hazardous of the holes. He was glad that he had insisted Annabel take an inside seat, for although the skies were clear, a chill wind had got up as darkness fell, and he regretted having left behind his heavyweight overcoat. At least the dear girl would be able to get a little sleep on the journey.

Perhaps he should have agreed to stay in Inverary overnight, but the thought of encountering any one of the individuals participating in that sorry scene in the court, filled him with horror. The sooner they were away from the place, the sooner they could all resume their normal lives.

'Looks like we shall have to lighten the load here, sir,' the driver declared, as, on rounding the bend, the gradient increased sharply.

David turned to his fellow passengers, two strangers bound for Oban, and four of the quarrymen who had come to witness the trial and give support to the McDougals.

'It looks as though we shall have to walk for a little, gentlemen,' he suggested to them. 'What say we lend the driver a hand?'

With some unwilling groans from the two strangers, but a more hearty response from the islanders, shoulders were applied to the back wheels and the ungainly vehicle was soon clawing its way up the steep slope. One tourist, elegantly clad in a dove grey suit of fashionable cut, swore softly as his hand came away from the wheel covered in thick black axle grease. His companion, equally elegant in green tweed with a long, caped coat to match, displayed a dusty mark where he had lent his shoulder to the muddy luggage-box at the rear of the vehicle.

Once under way, the coach swung off out of sight, and it was some minutes before the walking passengers caught up with it. The driver had reined in the horses and was allowing them to rest a little, to nibble at the succulent wayside grasses, and drink a little water from the burn.

Below them lay the great silver sheet of Loch Awe stretching away towards the west.

'How long now to Oban, driver?' demanded one of the strangers.

'Another three hours at least, by way of the southern shore,' declared the driver.

'But I understood the route was to the north, and through the Pass of Brander,' grumbled the other stranger.

'Normally, that would be so, sir,' the driver answered him, politely enough. 'But all of your fellow passengers are bound for the isles of Seileach and Eisdalsa. For them, the journey is shorter by the southern shore.'

'Why were we not informed of this change?' the first man challenged hotly. 'What right have you to alter the route in order to suit a few of the passengers?'

'These ladies and gentlemen are my regular customers, sir.' Somewhat more impatient now, the driver lapsed into the broad accents of his native Argyll. 'I think you will agree that they are entitled to first call upon my services.'

'We shall see about that.' Awareness of their utter dependence upon the driver made the two men even more indignant. 'I shall report this to your superiors,' cried he of the green cape.

'And who might they be?' enquired the driver smoothly.

'Why, the owner of this vehicle, of course,' declared the man.

'But that is myself, d'you see?' explained the driver triumphantly.

Both strangers were left speechless, while the Eisdalsa contingent smiled wryly but made no comment.

As the coach turned off to follow the southern shore of the loch, the driver pulled up beside a traveller striding out along the side of the road.

'Good evening to you, Mr McDougal,' the driver greeted Jack. 'Will you be wanting a lift to Eisdalsa with my other passengers?'

Jack stood back against the stone wall to the side of the road.

'It is kind of you to offer, Fergus,' he responded, 'but I fear that I have no money for the fare to Eisdalsa.'

David leaned towards the driver and whispered a few words in his ear. The man nodded imperceptibly then called out again.

'No matter about the fare now, Jack,' he exclaimed persuasively. 'Just you get up behind here. There's plenty of others to make up the cost of the journey, and I may have need of your strong back, to get us over Kilninver Bray!'

Gratefully, the young man climbed aboard. With his assistance and that of the other male passengers on the steepest slopes, the Oban Flyer trundled down into Eisdalsa village at around midnight. The two strangers, exhausted by the journey and their own not inconsiderable efforts in ensuring its completion, elected to remain that night in the village, putting up at the temperance inn. Much relieved by this decision, the driver agreed to take them on their way as early as possible the following morning.

* * *

Mary McCulloch looked about her delightedly. The new schoolroom was so light and airy, quite different from the gloomy buildings which she had been forced to inhabit during her years of training in Glasgow.

'Why, Mr Campbell, you have done wonders with the design,' she gasped, admiring the newly varnished furniture, the chairs and desks graduated in size to suit the ages of her potential pupils, the bright green tiles to halfway up the wall, and the contrast of spotless white paint and whitewashed upper walls and ceiling.

There were cupboards to store books, large tables for craft work and displays, a huge blackboard covering the end wall of the room, and rectangles of softboard on which to pin up the children's work. Not one of the items she had requested had been forgotten.

'It is all quite, quite perfect,' she declared. 'How did you know exactly what to buy? I am sure that I was not this precise in my instructions!'

'I have to confess that I consulted Mrs McIntyre who put me in touch with the right suppliers!' Murdo Campbell, delighted at Mary's reaction, felt that his efforts had been well worthwhile.

'Now all that I have to do is to find sufficient pupils to fill it!' she exclaimed happily. 'Do the families know that the school will be opening next week?'

Until now, the population of Lunga had been small. There had not been enough children to warrant opening a school. Since most of the early employees originated from the islands of Seileach and Eisdalsa, it had been little problem to lodge the youngsters with relatives close by the schools on those two islands during the school year.

Murdo Campbell was, however, expanding his enterprise. All summer, his engineers had been installing new cutting machinery which would speed up the initial process in the making of roofing slates. As the rate at which the thin slabs of stone came off the saw benches increased, it would take many

more knappers to cut the different sizes of slates required. He had scoured the countryside for skilled men, travelling as far as Wales and Cornwall to find them.

More men meant their families as well, and the need for proper housing and a school.

While there were those who despised the manner in which Murdo Campbell had started up his quarries on Lunga, by virtually stealing his workforce from William Whylie, no one doubted his ability as a works manager, and many admired the way in which he had gone about building villages, a church, and now a new school on the island. He had sealed his reputation as a good employer, interested in the local community, by appointing as teacher in his one-roomed school the Minister's daughter, Mary McCulloch.

Some less charitable souls might have considered the new school a bribe to encourage the prettiest girl in Eisdalsa to stay under Campbell's influence. That was certainly the interpretation that Dougal McGillivray put upon the affair when, on a Sunday afternoon in late-August, Mary persuaded him to row herself and her father over to Lunga to see the new premises.

Dougal fingered the furniture, admired the equipment laid out neatly in its purpose-built drawers and cupboards, and remarked: 'Gone to extreme lengths, hasn't he?'

'Oh, you are such an old grouch,' Mary laughed merrily. 'Doesn't it occur to you that Mr Campbell might be a budding philanthropist, a second Mr Coats!'

Dougal shook his head. He had heard William's version of the manner in which Murdo had persuaded the Marquis to give him Whylie's best men, and did not believe that to be the work of any philanthropist.

'Well,' Mary declared, 'I shall be moving into my new home on Monday, and the school will open the following week. I hope that I can call upon you both to assist me?' The Minister looked crestfallen.

'I had hoped that you might return to live at the Manse with me, my dear,' he sighed. 'However, if this is what you want, who am I to stand in your way?'

Dougal remembered this old gentleman in the days when his wife was alive. Myra McCulloch had been a force to be reckoned with. He did not think that she would have approved of her daughter working so closely with a man of Murdo Campbell's reputation. Since his wife's death, Mr McCulloch had lost much of his former decisiveness. Even in the pulpit his admonitions did not carry the weight of former years.

Well, thought Dougal, if he could only satisfy the Eisdalsa Quarrying Company's desire to re-equip with modern machinery, perhaps there might be a permanent place for him. Then he would be in a position to make a proper offer of marriage to Mary and Murdo Campbell would have to look elsewhere for a schoolteacher!

As the three of them walked slowly along the road towards the pier, where Dougal had tied his boat, Murdo Campbell himself approached them from the direction of his new house, built a short way outside the village, well away from the noise and grime of the quarries.

'Why, good day to you, Miss Mary,' he exclaimed. 'Showing your father your new schoolhouse, I have no doubt? How do you do, Minister . . . Mr McGillivray?'

Dougal felt his greeting to be friendly enough, but could not bring himself to like the man.

'When will you be moving into your house, Miss Mary?' asked Campbell politely.

'I thought Monday, if that is convenient, Mr Campbell?' she replied.

'Oh, call me Murdo, Miss Mary. Mr Campbell seems so formal between friends.'

'As you wish . . . Murdo.' She half smiled at him, sensing the tension building up in Dougal who stood rigidly at her side.

'Monday will be very satisfactory,' Campbell agreed. 'I will send over my personal barque with a couple of men, to help with your furniture and so on.'

'There will be no need for that,' barked Dougal. 'I shall see to Miss McCulloch's removal myself.'

'Thank you all the same for the offer,' Mary put in hastily. Really it was too bad of Dougal to display such open hostil ity towards her employer. One might almost think he was jealous!

'As you wish,' Murdo replied casually. He had had no idea that Miss McCulloch had such a staunch protector. He would have to watch his step here . . . but the young man's antagonism could prove quite an amusing challenge.

The Quarry Master doffed his hat to Mary, bowed slightly to the Minister, and nodded curtly somewhere in Dougal's direction.

'Good day to you all,' he said, and strode off towards the quarry, leaving the party for Eisdalsa to make its way to the shore.

Chapter 2

There was a fine drizzle on the morning when they drove Ellen McDougal away in a closed van behind two jet black horses. The similarity to a hearse was not lost upon Katrina McDougal and her husband John. They stood alone, outside the gates of Inverary gaol, to watch their daughter carried off out of their lives forever.

As the vehicle passed close by them, before sweeping round into the High Street, they caught a glimpse of a chalk-white face and staring eyes through the small barred window in the rear door.

Katrina caught her breath, gave a single cry of distress, and waved a crumpled handkerchief. Her husband stood stiffly beside her, pain, humiliation and despair etching themselves upon his haggard features.

They watched as their daughter's conveyance trundled off along the side of the loch, waiting until it disappeared into the mist.

'Come awa' wi' yer, woman,' the farmer said gruffly. 'We mun get back hame. Oor Jack will be needin' a haund with the beasts.'

They turned away sadly, knowing that they would never see their girl again.

At the end of the street the road branched, one way to Glasgow, the other towards Dalmally, and home. They took the left-hand fork and made their way out of the town, up the steep winding lane to the top of the brae.

Here, an old drover's road branched off due westwards. It was a path not frequented by vehicles, and therefore not uncomfortably rutted. By cutting across the hills in this fashion,

they could knock many miles off the long journey home to Eisdalsa. With luck, they would reach the croft of Katrina's kinfolk at Fincharn, beside Loch Awe, before nightfall.

Archibald McFinnon looked up from the pile of rocks which he was using to repair a low wall which penned the sheep when necessary, and sheltered them from the cruel winter winds. It had been laid in ruins by the countless numbers of animals determined to reach the succulent grasses which grew in the water-meadows at the head of Loch Fyne.

Recognising the dark wagon which passed close by, careering along the Glasgow road, he said a wee prayer for the occupants. Whatever they had done, they deserved better than to be compelled to rot in some foul prison.

Archie stretched his back, and, as he had done every morning of his twenty-six short years, thanked God that he was a Highlander, born and bred.

Gyp, his collie dog, gave a sharp bark. The dog was down by the shore where a small flock of sheep had gathered much closer to the water's edge than usual.

'Och, in the Name!' he cried, exasperated. 'Where will the stupit things get to next? They'll be swimming in the loch, just!'

He dropped the stone he had so carefully selected, reached for his crook, and strode out along the bank of the turbulent river, towards its mouth.

As he neared the marshy area which divided the Duke's meadows from the loch shore, he could see Gyp, almost demented with excitement, dancing around the group of sheep. They, in turn, seemed set upon remaining in the marsh. They crowded in upon a particular spot, worrying at something lying amongst the reeds.

As he approached, the shepherd tried to make out what it was that attracted the beasts. He had to get to within a few yards of the spot, however, before he recognised what it was that the sheep had found.

It was the body of a man.

Sodden clothing was stretched tightly over the swollen corpse which lay face down amongst the tall reeds.

Gingerly, Archie reached out to turn the head to one side. At the sudden movement, water gushed out from mouth and nose, giving the muddied face a streaky appearance.

Archie did not think he knew the man . . . but then, he considered it unlikely that, after being submerged in the water, even his own mother would recognise him. His clothes were of good quality, and the one remaining boot was as good as any Archie had ever seen, far better than his own. What a pity, he thought, that the careless fellow had managed to lose one of them!

He felt in the pockets . . . not much there. There were a few coins, a fine lawn handkerchief, and some soggy papers whose smudged writing meant little to the illiterate shepherd.

In the inside pocket of the waistcoat, Archie discovered a gold watch. It sprang open at his touch, revealing some writing engraved inside the cover. Archie tried hard to make out what it said.

To Peter Alexander Lugas,
On the occasion of his twenty-first birthday.
From his father, Alexander Lugas.

The sheriff's officer hated this part of his work. It was not the viewing or the identifying of bodies which he abhorred. He had seen plenty of drowned corpses during his life, they did not shock him any longer. No, it was telling the relatives the sad news which he disliked, for he could not bear to see a woman cry.

It was a stout, rather stony-faced housekeeper who answered his knock at the Castle.

'I would speak with the Factor, if you please, ma'am,' he requested apologetically.

'The master is not at home!' Mrs Meecham answered, and attempted to close the door.

'Then perhaps I may see Mrs Lugas?' he continued quickly. 'It is a very grave matter that I come about.'

Mrs Meecham searched his face, detecting the urgency in the man.

'I will see if Madam is at home,' she replied grandly, and leaving the officer on the doorstep, retreated into the inner part of the Castle.

Some moments passed before the housekeeper returned. Sergeant Kinross, embarrassed to be left in this situation, shuffled his feet, turning about in order to observe the view. The wind coming up the glen was a chill north-easter, and the day was cool for early September.

'Mrs Lugas will see you now.' Mrs Meecham had reappeared suddenly, startling him with her abrupt announcement.

Alicia Lugas had an intuition that the officer's visit concerned her son. For several days she had had a strange foreboding. Alexander had told her that he had seen Peter at the trial, although apparently the Factor had deliberately avoided any confrontation with his son.

She had known instinctively that Peter was in some kind of trouble. What possible interest could he have in the case of Ellen McDougal? Why should he bother to travel all the way to Inverary, unless . . . the reason did not bear thinking about. Now here was a policeman with important news according to Mrs Meecham.

From the look on the face of the sheriff's constable, it was indeed a serious matter.

'Sergeant Kinross, madam.' The officer stood awkwardly just inside the door of Alicia's little withdrawing-room.

'Won't you come in, Sergeant?' she invited. 'And take a seat. I am afraid that my husband is away from home today, but I shall be happy to take a message for him.'

'What I have to say concerns you both, ma'am.' Kinross fumbled with his cap, trying to summon up the courage to divulge his awful tidings.

'Then you had better tell it to me.' Alicia steeled herself

for what she was about to hear. She was sure now that it concerned Peter.

'The body of a young man was washed up in Loch Fyne this morning, ma'am.' The sergeant scrutinised her face and, detecting no obvious sign of a distressing outburst, continued: 'I have reason to believe that the young man was your son, Mr Peter Lugas. Er . . . he was carrying this watch in his pocket.'

Kinross handed the gold hunter to Mrs Lugas.

She took it in her hand, looked carefully at it for a few minutes, and then opened up the back. At the sight of the words engraved inside, she snapped it shut and placed the watch very deliberately on the table. Then her hand began to shake. Her whole body seemed to convulse. She let out one tortured scream, and fainted away.

Kinross ran to the door and wrenched it open, shouting for Mrs Meecham. That good lady was not far away. She would never leave her mistress for long in the company of a complete stranger, sheriff's man or no!

'What is it?' she gasped when she saw Alicia on the floor. 'Come, man, help me to lift her.'

They placed her on the sofa and while Mrs Meecham applied smelling salts, Kinross explained what had happened to Peter.

'You foolish fellow,' chided the housekeeper. 'Why did you not tell me the message? I would have put it to her more gently.'

'But the lady seemed so composed when I began,' he protested. 'The last thing I expected was that she should react in this way.'

'Well, you have delivered your message,' Mrs Meecham declared. 'Perhaps you will go now and fetch the doctor to repair the damage you have done!'

She turned her back on the bewildered officer, leaving him no alternative but to carry out her instruction.

Constable Andy McPhail was charged with the task of making certain routine enquiries concerning the death of Peter Lugas.

Sergeant Kinross had been convinced that the young man had met his death by accident. By all accounts he was a drunkard. According to the landlord, he had been in the tavern all afternoon, during the trial in the courthouse. By early evening, when, the sergeant understood, Lugas had left the bar and wandered off, he had been unsteady on his feet and not in control of his actions. It seemed certain that he had gone down to the pier and fallen in.

The procurator fiscal would require more than the sergeant's uncorroborated opinion before he would give a verdict of accidental death, however. So, prior to setting out for Creag Castle, he had charged McPhail with responsibility for taking statements from some of the other customers in the tavern that night.

McPhail had been in the Force only six months but he was an observant young man. In his own estimation he had considerably more brain between his ears than had his sergeant, whom he regarded as a plodder. This was his first case of suspicious death, and he was determined to leave no stone unturned in discovering what had happened to Peter Lugas. Suppose it was a case of suicide, or even murder?

'Do you recall the exact time at which the deceased entered your premises?' he enquired of the landlord.

Will Downie sighed, irritated to be asked the very same questions already addressed to him by Sergeant Kinross. Reluctantly, he repeated his previous answer.

'It was just after noon when the young man came in. He drank three, maybe four, glasses of ale before the bar began to fill up.'

'Did he speak with anyone?' McPhail was writing down the landlord's replies carefully in his notebook. When a response was not immediately forthcoming, the constable licked the end of his pencil and looked up.

Will Downie thought for a moment. 'I recall he asked someone, a man standing next to him at the bar, what the verdict had been.'

'Did he make any comment when he heard the answer?'

'Not that I heard,' Downie replied, then suddenly remembering, 'That was when he ordered his first dram of malt.'

McPhail wrote carefully.

'How many whiskies did he drink?'

'How would I know?' the landlord retorted defensively. 'There were other customers, you know!'

'Did Lugas appear to have any reason for getting so drunk? Did he say anything about the trial, for example?'

'Not a word that I heard,' replied the landlord. 'Mind you, he comes from Eisdalsa, same as the wee girl who was on trial . . . maybe he knew her.'

McPhail realised that the questions were getting him nowhere. He rejected the offer of a drink when Downie made it, responding in superior fashion, 'Not while on police business, Landlord. Thank you all the same.'

The constable sat at the end of the bar, waiting for the evening customers to arrive. The crowd was considerably less than on the day of the trial. There were none of the people from Eisdalsa, for a start.

Downie sidled to the far end of the bar and spoke quietly to a couple of regulars as he drew their accustomed drinks.

'Constable's asking questions about the night that young fellow drowned. Any of you remember him, or who he spoke with?'

'Why?' one of the men asked. 'I thought it was an accident, his falling in the water?'

'Seems not.' The landlord was enjoying the conspiratorial nature of the discussion. 'Seems as if the police suspect murder!'

There was a hush in the general conversation. All eyes fell upon the young constable, who began to shuffle on his stool a little uncomfortably. He did not think Sergeant Kinross would quite approve of this turn in the enquiry.

'Only trying to gather the facts, you understand.' He tried to dismiss their assumption, and regain his own authority.

'Could have been a murder.'

The voice was that of a thin-faced individual who was not familiar to the rest of the customers.

'What would you know of the matter, sir?' enquired McPhail.

'I happened to be here with friends from Eisdalsa,' was the reply. 'I overheard an exchange between the dead man and the girl's brother.'

Hurriedly, McPhail led the speaker away, out of hearing of the remainder of the customers.

The two spoke quietly for some time, McPhail writing busily in his notebook every now and again. At last he stood up, shook hands with the witness, and departed.

When he reached the door of the tavern, he turned back to the landlord.

'What time was it when Mr Lugas left?' he enquired.

There was a hush. Two or three of the men glanced at each other and then at the landlord. They wanted to be helpful, but most of them could not remember a thing about that evening. Deprived of the spectacle of a public hanging, they had drowned their disappointment in strong spirits.

The thin-faced man remembered.

'It was nine of the clock,' he proclaimed. 'I recall it precisely.' Then, almost as an afterthought, 'Jack McDougal followed soon after.'

There was a general buzz of speculation at this announcement. McPhail noted the time, deliberately refrained from making any comment on the revelation, thanked them all, and walked out.

Alexander Lugas's thin-faced gamekeeper managed to keep the smile from his tight lips. He would show young McDougal, suggesting that Peter Lugas was somehow implicated in the girl's misfortune . . . Peter Lugas, the Factor's son. He would see that crofter's brat hanged!

At the rear of the Oban Inn there was a small parlour reserved for the hostelry's more important clients. The landlord had been delighted to let this accommodation to the two gentlemen

who had been deposited upon his doorstep by the Oban Flyer the previous morning. After a day in the Royal Bank Chambers with Mr Campbell, they had enjoyed his wife's cooking and retired for the night with only a modicum of complaints about the state of the bedding. They had not yet indicated that they were staying a further night, but he was hopeful that they would prove valuable customers.

At noon Mr Patrick Campbell of the Royal Bank appeared, asking for the two visitors. He was followed shortly by none other than the Marquis of Stirling's Factor, Alexander Lugas.

Rubbing his hands with glee at this unexpected piece of excellent business, the landlord offered the company refreshment and was not disappointed when all four ordered whisky, to be followed by the best dinner that the inn could provide.

Campbell rose to his feet as Alexander entered the low-ceilinged apartment.

'Ah, here you are at last, Lugas,' he greeted the Factor. 'I must say I had expected a little more enthusiasm on your part. You have kept our guests waiting.'

Lugas regarded Campbell coldly.

'My apologies,' he said. 'I take it you have not heard of the death of my son?'

The two visitors showed signs of concern, but Campbell, to whom Peter's death was not news, saw no reason for the usual condolences. It was common knowledge that Alexander Lugas had disinherited his son.

'Yes,' he replied, brusquely, 'sad news, to be sure. My sympathies.' Then, without a pause, 'May I introduce Mr Francis Farley of Hitchin in Hertfordshire, and his surveyor, Donald Platt.'

'Mr Farley.' Alexander shook the white, fish-like hand which the Englishman offered. 'Mr Platt.'

Farley muttered some embarrassed condolences. The surveyor nodded curtly, but made no move to shake hands with him.

'Well, gentlemen,' Campbell hastened to get the company settled, placing a brimming glass in every hand, 'shall we

talk business while we are waiting? Then we may concentrate upon enjoying our meal. I am told that Mistress McNaughton bakes the best beefsteak pie this side of the Cairngorms!'

'As Mr Lugas is not yet party to our deliberations, Campbell,' Farley spoke, as though his mouth were full of marbles, in a thin whining voice, 'perhaps you will be so kind as to outline the plan. For myself, I am quite exhausted by our journey and our discussions of yesterday. Why on earth my patron should wish to inhabit any estate in these parts, is beyond my comprehension!'

Alexander Lugas looked mildly surprised. 'Do I understand that it is not yourself for whom the property is required, Mr Farley?'

Since first setting eyes on this foppish character, Alexander had been trying to envisage the reception likely to be meted out to him by the parishioners of Seileach.

'Oh, good Lord, no!' exclaimed the other. 'I am merely charged with the task of purchasing title to suitable land, upon which my employer will build his country retreat.'

'How will you know that the gentleman will agree with whatever choice you make?' Lugas was intrigued. What kind of man was it, who would entrust such a personal decision to a lackey?

'Oh, have no fear, Mr Lugas,' piped Farley. 'My employer knows the country hereabouts, and has been quite specific in his choice of territory.'

'It seems,' Campbell interrupted hurriedly, 'that the prospective purchaser frequented the islands of Eisdalsa and Seileach in his younger days, and has set his heart upon building a home there. His Lordship's agent at Aberfeldy has been gracious enough to furnish us with a map of the policies involved.'

From his portfolio, the engineer, Platt, who had remained silent throughout, withdrew a folded sheet of stiff linen which he spread out on the table.

Lugas examined the document closely for a few minutes. His sharp intake of breath went unnoticed by his companions who were busy refilling their glasses.

The area shown lay to the west of the Ballachuan estate, incorporating some rough pasture, long laid to waste, which had reverted to bracken and gorse. The area designated for the construction of the owner's house, however, covered a substantial area of good ground skirting the loch, including those lands ascribed to the croft which for generations had been worked by the Johnstone family.

'This is the croft for which Sir Henry Munro has been waiting for three years,' declared Lugas. 'In the unlikely event of His Lordship's consenting to an eviction, the Ballachuan estate has prior claim.'

'The Marquis has given me power of attorney during his absence abroad,' Patrick Campbell explained. 'I have been able to negotiate a boundary change with Sir Henry. He strikes a hard bargain, but I believe all parties are now well satisfied!' He tapped his jacket, as though searching for something, and eventually produced a somewhat crumpled letter.

'This note explains my situation.'

Lugas took the document. There was no mistaking its authenticity. He held a low opinion of the Marquis's cousin, and found it difficult to believe that His Lordship had left matters in such unsure hands.

If the scoundrel is up to no good, he told himself, Alexander Lugas's co-operation will cost him dear!

'His Lordship's agent at Aberfeldy did see some opposition to the proposal at first,' Campbell added, 'but when he examined the records, he found that the tenant has fallen short in the payment of his rents for two successive years. He considered, therefore, that you would agree to an eviction.'

Lugas was certain that Campbell was aware that his cousin George had agreed to accept lower rents because of the disastrous seasons experienced in the past two years. First there had been the miserable wet summer of 1885, which

was followed by the drought of 1886. The crofters had been unable to produce a living for their families, let alone pay the increased rents which the Factor had demanded. At the express request of the Marquis himself tenants had been excused from making full payment.

'I am sure that Cousin George will be more than pleased to have some respectable income from the land,' Campbell continued persuasively. 'He has every right to evict tenants who will not pay their rent.'

Alexander was careful to make no comment in front of witnesses. He would go along with Campbell, for a price, but he had to protect his own position.

'Well,' he replied, 'I am sure that Mr Farley and Mr Platt have no interest in the internal affairs of the Stirling Estates. These are matters for His Lordship and yourself.'

At the Factor's unexpected acceptance of his own interpretation of the position, Campbell puffed himself up, beamed and remarked, rather condescendingly, 'As you say, Lugas, as you say.'

Lugas returned to the map and for a few moments pored over it, conversing quietly with Platt. The engineer was surprisingly eloquent, once launched upon an explanation of his design for the erection of a superior country house and steadings.

'At my client's request,' he explained, 'all the public rooms and principal bedrooms overlook the bay. I did try to impress upon him the direction of the prevailing winds, and the problems likely to arise due to the excessive rainfall, but he insisted. Therefore, to ensure comfort, and so as not to detract from the view, you will notice that I have incorporated this glassed-in verandah. It will be possible to see through it to the ocean in bad weather, while the public rooms remain insulated from the worst draughts. In summer, on the other hand, the glass building will make an ideal sitting area from which to admire the scenery. These large doors may be slid back, providing an airy porch, only for the very calmest days, of course.'

Alexander Lugas thought of the howling gales which swept along the coast for the greater part of the year, and smiled wryly. What was it they said about a fool and his money?

'To what purpose would your client be putting the lands around the house?' he queried, knowing it to be excellent soil, benefiting from a century of patient cultivation.

'I believe that it will be laid down to gardens, sir,' replied Platt. 'The client is a great traveller and collector of plants. His intention is to set up a garden to rival any on the western seaboard. See here and here? These are summer houses to be situated at the far end of vistas already planned.'

He indicated a pair of neat structures which occupied the two higher spots on the land and which would give remarkably fine views across the Inner Hebrides. Down by the loch shore a further structure arrested Alexander's attention.

'What is that, pray?' he asked, and then again, 'And this here? There is no island in that loch!'

'The building by the shore is a boat house. The island is to be constructed. According to my employer, it is the site of an ancient lake dwelling which he wishes to reinstate as an historical curiosity . . . a folly, in fact.'

That the mysterious prospective tenant should know something of the territory in which he intended to live did not surprise Alexander at all. There had been many visitors to Eisdalsa since the steamers from Glasgow were scheduled to call regularly at the village.

For someone to know the secret of the lake village however . . . that required the kind of local knowledge to which very few lifelong inhabitants were privy. Lugas's curiosity almost got the better of him.

'Your client is well informed. I wonder . . .' he began, then changed his enquiry to a statement, 'He has certainly chosen an excellent site for his house,' he concluded lamely.

Farley now asserted himself, considering that Platt, who was after all just an artisan, was receiving far too much attention from His Lordship's Factor.

'Platt, here, will need to see the ground again for himself,' he declared. 'Check boundaries, take a few levels, that sort of thing,' he explained disparagingly. 'I suppose you have no objection to our making a survey of the area during the next few days?'

'On the contrary.' Lugas beamed encouragingly. 'I was about to suggest that you might find it more convenient to lodge at Creag Castle during your stay. I shall be pleased to accommodate you.'

He had already decided that there was too much at stake to let these two go their own way. Under an obligation to him, as their host, they would find it difficult to be secretive about their activities.

'We could not impose upon your wife at a time of mourning.' Platt was the one to protest.

'We have ample servants, sir,' he replied, appreciating the consideration shown by the dour engineer. 'There will be no need for my wife to be troubled at all.'

Realising that the suggested arrangement would be very convenient, and having far less regard for the proprieties than his companion, Farley readily agreed to accept Alexander's invitation.

Leaving Campbell to organise transport for their guests, Lugas himself set off on horseback for the Castle. Mrs Meecham must be alerted. Despite all his misdeeds, Peter's death had left Alicia prostrate with grief. Beaton had been obliged to knock her out with laudanum. Still, no reason why these two guests should disturb her in any way.

Only one person was not pleased with the arrangement. The landlord of the Oban Inn watched in dismay as his valuable clients collected their belongings and piled into the one-horse carriage which Campbell had hired on their behalf.

Campbell watched Farley and Platt until they were out of sight. He had surprised himself with his own shrewdness and considerable business acumen. He scarcely read the bill which was thrust into his hand by the disappointed innkeeper.

Pulling from his pocket three coins, he put them into the man's hand.

'Keep the change,' he said magnanimously.

'Thank you, sir,' replied the landlord, touching his forelock.

Only when Campbell had turned the corner with a jaunty step did the man examine what was in his hand. Three half-sovereigns was little enough payment for a flagon of best malt whisky, three excellent dinners and two beds for the night. The bill had been for twenty-nine shillings and ninepence. The banker's generosity amounted to a tip of threepence!

Annabel's suggestion exactly suited Elizabeth's mood.

It was a bright Saturday afternoon in early September. All week she had been incarcerated in the schoolroom, while squalls of rain lashed the tall windows. The gloom and dampness had a curious effect upon her pupils, making them fractious and argumentative. It was not an atmosphere conducive either to learning or good tempers. By Friday, the building had become so cold that Elizabeth had seriously considered lighting the stove. Unfortunately funds were very low, and she would need to conserve fuel to carry her through the worst of the winter months.

Saturday had dawned bright and warm, however, and when Margaret arrived soon after breakfast with a note from Annabel suggesting that the two of them visit Major Lovat that afternoon, she was more than willing to agree.

David had relinquished the chaise so that they could make the three-mile journey in comfort. Even when they were forced to dismount from the carriage, so that the mare could pull it over the summit of the pass, they were not put out. Annabel took the leading rein, while Elizabeth ran on ahead so that she could admire the view from the top.

The road ran steeply down into a sheltered cove. Ballachuan House and the tiny row of estate workers' cottages which stretched out alongside a white sandy beach were well sheltered from the Atlantic gales.

Once at the summit, the mare stood patiently waiting while the two women settled themselves, then, slowly and carefully, Annabel guided her down towards the village. Once on the flat strand, Annabel allowed Bess to have her head and the jaunty little vehicle bowled along for a while until they reached the Major's cottage. Annabel jumped down and hitched the old horse to the rail, while Elizabeth collected a basket of cakes and preserves pressed upon them by Morag.

Laughing happily, the two friends pushed open the garden gate and strode up to the front door. Almost immediately it was flung open. Martha McDougal stood there, white-faced and anxious.

'Oh, thank heaven you have come, Mrs Beaton,' she cried. 'The Good Lord Himself must have sent you!'

'Why, Martha, whatever is the trouble?' Annabel demanded.

'It's the master, ma'am. He has taken another shock and I cannot rouse him.'

Annabel pushed past the housekeeper and pulled off her hat and gloves.

'He's in the parlour, ma'am. I havna been able to move him.'

Annabel threw open the door to the trim little room. Major Lovat was sprawled in his chair in an ungainly pose. He had slumped down with his legs twisted beneath him. His head lay awkwardly over one of the arms. His eyes were open, staring. Saliva dribbled out of the side of his mouth and, but for the moaning sound which accompanied his stertorous breathing, he might have been dead.

'Elizabeth, Martha,' Annabel called, 'help me to raise him in the chair.'

With great difficulty, the three women manipulated the body of the stricken doctor until he sat upright, his head against the cushions and his legs supported by a footstool.

Reassured that his breathing was no longer impaired by the position of his head, Annabel knelt beside the old gentleman and tried to rouse him.

'Major Lovat, it is I, Annabel Beaton. Elizabeth McIntyre is here with me. I am going to send for David . . . he will be here very soon.'

The staring eyes blinked then focused on the familiar features, and Major Lovat's face twisted in a grotesque caricature of a smile.

'Ann . . .' he attempted her name. She took his hand encouragingly.

'Hush now,' she said. 'Just you rest here a while. When you feel a little stronger, we will help you to your bed.'

She motioned to Elizabeth, and the two women withdrew into the narrow hallway.

'I will go for David,' Elizabeth assured her, 'you can do so much more for the Major than I.'

'I do not know if he will be at home,' Annabel told her. 'He will have left a list of visits on a pad in his surgery. Ask Daisy to find it for you. Stuart should be home by now. Send him to fetch David, or Margaret if it is not too far.'

'I will do my best, Annabel,' Elizabeth assured her. 'That is all that any of us can do.'

The words were not lost on Annabel. It was clear to them both that Major Lovat had not long to live, and that fetching David was a gesture only. It was quite likely that the old man would not survive until his physician arrived.

Back in the parlour, Annabel found Martha wringing her hands helplessly. Thinking it best that the poor young woman have something to occupy her, Annabel suggested she made them both a cup of tea, and enquired after Martha's boy.

'He will still be up at the Big House at this time of day, ma'am,' was Martha's reply.

'Well then, when we have had our tea,' said Annabel carefully, 'I want you to go to the head gardener and ask if your son Ian may come and help us to move the Major.'

Happy to be busy with routine tasks, Martha went out into the kitchen, leaving Annabel to attend to her patient.

Alerted by the sound of their voices, the Major was conscious when she returned to his side. His power of speech was lost, but his eyes were very expressive.

Gaining Annabel's attention he directed her, with his gaze, to a pile of magazines and papers on the table by the window.

'What is it?' she asked. 'Something you want me to fetch?'

He blinked once, and Annabel was instantly reminded of the code which little Margaret had invented for him after the first stroke.

'One blink for yes and two for no?' Annabel asked.

He confirmed it by blinking once.

'What is it you want me to fetch?'

His eyes went again to the table. Annabel got to her feet and went over to see what she could find.

On top of the untidy pile of papers lay a crisp new sheet in a neat, professional hand which she recognised immediately as his own. She picked it up.

'Is this what you want?' she asked.

One blink for yes.

Trying not to read the document, for she was aware that it was his Will, she turned it over, and read the last line.

'Signed this day by my own hand', followed by Lovat's signature.

She glanced up to see that he was staring at her, and from her to the paper.

'What is it?' she asked him. 'What do you want me to do?'

Again he studied her face, and then the hands with which she held the Will.

She started suddenly. Of course, the document had not been witnessed.

'You want me to witness this?' she asked.

One blink for yes.

Annabel took a pen from the tray on the desk, dipped it in the ink and signed her name against the words he had already written.

'Witnessed this day by . . .'

Annabel appended the day's date and carefully blotted the document.

She turned round to show him that it was finished.

He had been able to wait no longer. The head had dropped to one side, the eyes were closed, and his two skeletal hands hung limply down on either side of the chair. Strangely, his mouth, which had been distorted in life by the slack muscles on one side of his face, was now in normal repose and there was the faintest smile upon his lips.

Annabel knelt beside her dear friend. She placed both his limp hands in his lap and kissed them.

Only then did she begin to weep.

Chapter 3

James Fisk had enjoyed the attention paid to his story by the young constable. The customers in the Argyll Inn were only too willing to buy him a drink in exchange for his account of the happenings on the night of the trial. Most of all he enjoyed relating the dialogue between himself and Constable McPhail.

'Aye, it is public-spirited folk like yourself Mr Fisk,' he repeated, embroidering just a little, 'is making easy work for we officers of the law!'

He downed his ale in one gulp and replaced the glass on the bar, confident of its replenishment.

'So,' his neighbour enquired eagerly, 'have they arrested McDougal, then?'

'Sergeant Kinross is away to Eisdalsa even as we speak,' boasted Fisk, repeating what he had learned at the police station earlier in the day.

As he acknowledged his companion's generosity, he announced with confidence, 'It would seem that there will be a public hanging after all!'

He finished his drink, and to a barrage of friendly farewells, took his leave of the company.

McAllister's fishing smack was leaving on the high tide for Eisdalsa. If he could persuade the fisherman to take him, he would be able to report to his master at the Castle in the morning.

There was an air of industry in the peaceful schoolroom.

To one side, the top class were busily scratching away with their new steel pens, proud to have put behind them forever their writing slates and slate pencils.

In front of Elizabeth, where she could keep an eye on them, were the six and seven year olds . . . familiar enough with classroom law to be able to get on with their exercises alone, but exhibiting just a little too much exuberance to be trusted not to talk, or to interfere with each other's work.

At the back of the classroom, a little group of five year olds was seated around Elizabeth's pupil teacher, Millicent Fergusson. They chanted their three times table almost in unison. Millicent, scarcely more than a child herself, held up her hand for silence.

'Polly Macmillan,' she called out, 'your lips were not moving. Do you not know your three times table?'

Wide-eyed, the infant nodded her head silently.

'Well then,' said Millicent, 'let me hear you say it.'

Polly stood up, folded her hands comfortably across her starched white pinafore and recited, 'Three ones are three, three twos are six, three threes are nine . . .' She came to the end, gave a pert little curtsy and sat down to the giggles of her friends.

'I see,' Millicent observed. 'So you do know your three times table after all. Next time, join in with the rest.'

Hearing the commotion from this quarter, Elizabeth had come to stand beside Millicent.

'Tell me, Polly,' she interrupted, 'if I buy two loaves which cost threepence each, how much money do I have to spend?'

The little girl counted out two threes on her fingers. 'Six pennies,' she replied.

'Why did you use your fingers?' Elizabeth asked.

Polly stared at her.

'Well,' Elizabeth explained, 'not two minutes ago you were chanting three times one is three, three times two is . . . what?'

'Six,' the child cried excitedly.

'Exactly,' said Elizabeth. 'And if I want four balls, each costing threepence, how much must I spend?'

'Four threes are . . . twelve,' Polly replied.

Satisfied that Polly actually understood what she was doing, Elizabeth turned to a rather unkempt little boy whose shock of dark brown hair hung over his eyes, and straggled behind his ears down to his greasy collar. Every two or three seconds the boy sniffed loudly, and drew his sleeve across his constantly dripping nose.

'Danny Smith,' Elizabeth addressed the tinker's child. 'How much does your mother charge for her brooms?'

'Threepence, miss,' the boy replied between wipes.

'Suppose I want to buy six of them.' Elizabeth tried to smile as she handed the ragged child one of her own handkerchiefs. 'How much money shall I need?'

'Sixpence, miss?' the child offered tentatively, giving a generous blow into the handkerchief.

'For six brooms at threepence each?' asked Elizabeth again. 'You would be robbing yourself!'

'Eighteen pence, miss,' Danny corrected himself, blanching to think of the beating he would have received from his father, had he made such a mistake on someone's doorstep.

'That is right,' said Elizabeth, retrieving her handkerchief and placing it carefully in a pocket she did not normally use!

'And how much is eighteen pence, Victoria?'

Six or seven hands shot up, ready with a reply. Elizabeth waited patiently while the baker's daughter struggled to convert eighteen pence to shillings and pence.

'One shilling and thre . . . one and sixpence, miss!' the child cried confidently, basking in Elizabeth's encouraging smile.

'Now, you see, children, arithmetical tables are not just pieces of poetry to learn and recite. They can be used to help us do things in our daily lives. If Mr Whylie has ten men working for three hours, how many hours of work must he pay for?'

Several hands waved frantically.

'Polly?' Elizabeth asked.

'Please, miss. Thirty, miss.' She gazed around triumphantly at her classmates.

Hinges creaked as the door to the schoolroom was pushed open warily. Silhouetted against the September sunshine were two small, woebegone figures, one a little taller than the other.

'Come along in and close the door, Donnie,' Elizabeth called out. 'Stand by the blackboard, both of you. You are very late today.'

The crofter's children shuffled disconsolately towards the teacher's desk and stood there, heads hanging, until Elizabeth had finished with the infants class.

'Now then, Donnie.' She spoke kindly, for it was unlikely that these two were late without good reason. 'What has delayed you both?'

Before her brother could answer, little Molly Johnstone burst into tears, her heart-rending sobbing attracting the interest of the rest of the class.

Elizabeth could not bear to see an unhappy child. In an instant she was kneeling on the floor with her arms around the weeping Molly. Once the sobs were sufficiently muffled by her ample bosom, she again enquired, 'Tell me, Donnie, what has happened?'

'The bailiff's men are coming to put us out of the croft, miss. Ma says we are not to go home tonight, but to stay at our auntie's house on the island. Molly doesn't like to stay away from home, miss.'

Donnie Johnstone was a mature boy for his eight years. He carried his responsibilities as an elder brother with great solemnity. Even though his own unhappiness at this turn of events was obvious, it was his little sister's distress which concerned him the most. As Molly withdrew her blotched and tear-stained face from the folds of Elizabeth's gown, he too knelt to comfort her, placing a firm and reassuring arm around her shoulders.

'Don't worry, Molly,' he urged, 'Ma and Pa will come for us as soon as they can. We shall all be together soon, just you wait!'

'Have you children had any breakfast?' Elizabeth asked. Clearly the day had begun early for the crofting family; it was

unlikely that Mrs Johnstone had had time to feed her weans before sending them off. The kindly teacher could understand the poor woman's desire to spare her stepchildren the sight of the bailiff and the sheriff's men turning them out of their home.

'A bannock, just,' Donnie told her. 'Ma said she did not want us under her feet while she packed up our things.'

'When are the men coming?' Elizabeth queried. 'Did your father say?'

'Pa has been given until six o'clock tonight to move out of the house, and round up all the beasts.' Donnie's tone was alarmingly matter-of-fact. In truth, the spectacle of a family removed from home and land was not an uncommon sight in rural Argyll. Elizabeth was surprised, however, to find tenants of His Lordship so summarily treated. Had William not assured her that the Marquis was being lenient over unpaid rents, in view of the difficult times the Eisdalsa and Seileach people had been having?

'Does your uncle know what is happening?' Elizabeth enquired. Archie Johnstone would want to be there helping his kinfolk, she was sure.

'No, miss,' Donnie responded. 'Pa said, if you were agreeable, I was to leave Molly in school and go across and tell Uncle Archie.'

Elizabeth told him to wait while she addressed the class.

'Children, you can see that I have some important matters to deal with. Miss Fergusson will take charge while I attend to Donnie and his sister. I do not wish to hear a single sound while I am over in the house. Is that understood?' She glared at the front row, and two or three six-year-old faces went very pink.

'If I hear that you have so much as sneezed, Jamie Derwent, I shall be thinking up some very special impositions for you!'

The boy in question, a particular bête noir of Elizabeth's, gave her a stare which might have been disbelief at her lack of trust, or might just have been construed as insolence. Choosing not to become embroiled on this occasion, Elizabeth wisely ignored his reaction.

To Millicent she said, 'I shall be as quick as I can, Miss Fergusson. If anyone becomes troublesome, send them straight over to the house.'

William read Elizabeth's note through and looked up at Archie Johnstone.

'Mrs McIntyre tells me that the family are to be turned out this evening. How long have they known that eviction was pending?'

'I saw my brother in church last Sunday, sir.' Archie was as anxious and bewildered as his nephew Donnie who stood white-faced beside him in the Quarry Manager's office. 'There was no mention of it then.'

'To evict without decent notice is unheard of,' protested William. 'Ewan must have known this was coming.'

'Last year, when the crops were so poor, the Factor said there had been a special dispensation from His Lordship, to defer an increase in rent,' Archie explained. 'But Donnie here tells me that the eviction notice says the Estate can no longer wait for arrears to be paid.'

'To give only twelve hours' notice seems unreasonably harsh,' William objected. 'There must be some misunderstanding. I shall certainly be making enquiries of the Factor myself. In the meantime, I am sure that your brother is in need of assistance to move his household. Take two or three of your comrades and go to the croft. See what you can do to help.'

When the man and his nephew had gone, William looked over to the desk where Anne McGillivray was entering the previous day's tally of made slates in the ledger.

'Make a note of the men who go to help Johnstone,' he instructed. 'Put them down for a day of general duties.'

Anne smiled to herself as she made a note. What an old softie he was, to be sure. Some of the men thought him tough, even severe at times . . . never without good reason though, for William could not abide fools or laggards. But, when people were in serious trouble, he could never do enough to help them.

'Since we have been interrupted, Mrs McGillivray,' William went on uncomfortably, 'perhaps we may have a little talk about a matter which has been troubling me for some time.'

Anne lowered her pen and placed it with exceptional concentration on the rack in front of her. It was coming. She had been expecting him to speak ever since Dougal had returned from the Welsh quarries, agog with all his new ideas.

'I think you know how much I appreciate the work that you have done for the Company since your husband's death, Anne.' William could not bring himself to look at her as he spoke. He rose from his chair and stood looking out of the salt-coated window.

'You know too, I am quite sure, that no amount of murmuring from the men about my employing a woman has any sway with me.' He turned to her now, seeking some sign of agreement. He was not disappointed.

'It is for economic reasons alone that I have made a very difficult decision.'

Anne made no comment but she smiled faintly, encouraging him to continue with his difficult speech.

'Your son has received an expensive education through the good offices of the Marquis, and it would be foolish if not downright profligate of me not to employ his skills. But, Anne, you of all people know how few men I am able to employ at the present time. To pay a wage to two members of one household, in such circumstances, could be construed as rank favouritism. While you were the sole earner in your family, there was a certain sympathy for your position, despite the natural prejudice of some of the men to a woman employee. If I take on Dougal at a regular salary, I have to forgo your services. You do understand, don't you? I am very sorry,' he finished lamely.

Anne understood only too well but refrained from pointing out that her own contribution was one which Dougal had no experience to undertake. William was only too well aware that he would be left without a bookkeeper as a result of his decision.

'I do understand your predicament,' she reassured him. 'I have waited these many weeks past to be told that I must go.'

'While Dougal remains a bachelor, tenancy of the house you share is assured, of course,' he hastened to sugar the bitter pill. 'In addition, as the widow of such a distinguished Company servant, you will always be entitled to a house while you wish to remain on the island,' he added.

'Thank you, sir,' she replied, relieved that the ordeal was over. 'When do you wish me to leave?'

'On Friday, if you please, Mrs McGillivray.' William felt more comfortable with the formal address, under the circumstances. 'Make up your entitlement and add one month's salary in lieu of notice.'

It was a very generous offer. Anne thanked him before getting back to her ledger.

When the whistle blew for the end of the day's operations in the quarry, William asked Anne to convey a message to Dougal, to attend for interview the following morning. Regretfully, he watched her as she left the office. Then, reaching for his pen, he began to compose a letter to Alexander Lugas.

Anne would miss the discipline of regular employment. She was a woman bursting with ideas, always busy with her hands, always looking ahead to something new. In a way, she would not be sorry to have more time to pursue other interests – there were all those books which Wee Annie was always urging her to read and Elizabeth had promised to give her lessons in sketching and painting. Dougal would earn enough to keep all three of them, and if he should marry someday soon, well, she would find some other kind of employment. Anne McGillivray was nothing if not resourceful.

By the time Archie Johnstone and his companions had walked the three miles to the croft, they had worked up a thirst which could only partly be assuaged by water from the wee burn which tumbled into the loch below Ewan's cottage.

The crofter himself was standing disconsolately in the yard. Some of the creatures were tethered ready for removal, a few chickens squawked in their makeshift carrying cases but others had escaped Ewan's eye and were pecking peacefully

down by the water's edge, alongside a few white ducks and a pair of vicious-looking geese.

As the time drew near for the farmer to leave his land, it had become more difficult for him to concentrate upon the business in hand.

Ewan had grown up on the croft. As wee boys, he and Archie had scurried around the yard here chasing the fowls, even as he was doing now. They had always worked hard, even as tiny tots. It was expected of farmers' children.

Those had been happy days. They had not been well off, but there was always enough to eat, and a warm place by the fire of a chill winter's evening.

As soon as he was old enough, Archie had gone to work in the quarries, leaving his younger brother to help on the farm. It was natural enough, therefore, that on the death of old Donald Johnstone, the croft should have come into Ewan's hands.

He had worked hard to keep his mother and his young sisters going, until the girls were old enough to be put out to service in the big house at Ballachuan.

He had married Mary Durrell when he was just twenty years of age and she a lassie of eighteen. Mary was a farmer's daughter from Kilmartin. He had met her when she accompanied her father to Oban market, to sell her mother's cheeses and the fine knitted garments produced by the womenfolk of that village. It was while buying himself a new guernsey, dyed dark blue, that he had first spoken to her.

Mary had brought a new dimension into Ewan's life, and although there were a few scraps in the kitchen, his new bride and his old mother had hit it off 'no' sae bad'. When Hector arrived, followed by Flora just two years later, Ewan felt that his cup was full and flowing over with happiness.

Things had begun to deteriorate after the birth of his daughter, Molly, when his second son, Donnie, was just three years old. Mary never regained her former strength, and when the cholera hit the island, his wife, who had insisted upon going to Eisdalsa to help with the sick, had herself succumbed to the terrible disease and died, leaving

the care of his four children in the hands of himself and his ailing mother.

As if to compound his troubles, in that very same year the Factor had threatened to increase the rent. In fact, had it not been for the intervention of the Marquis himself, they would have been evicted two years ago.

When he had brought Beth McLaren into the house, to help his mother with the children, and relieve himself of some of the work about the croft, tongues wagged. What was a young man doing with a widow, six years his senior, living under his roof?

They found out soon enough. Before the old wives could get their teeth into the situation, the pair were married. Neither denied that it had been a matter of convenience. Beth, widowed and childless, was seeking a home and employment. Ewan, also widowed, required a mother for his bairns. Having found a certain compatibility, and a degree of mutual solace in the relationship, what could be more natural than that the two should marry?

The older children found it hard to accept Beth as their mother. Flora, at ten years of age, was considered old enough to begin her training at the big house, under the watchful eye of her Aunt Emily, now risen to the post of Head Parlourmaid. There had been some whispering in the parish about the girl not attending school as the law decreed, but in view of the difficult circumstances, Elizabeth had persuaded the School Inspector to overlook Flora's age, if she agreed to attend the special night classes provided by the Ladies' Committee.

Now, the croft which Ewan had worked so hard to retain so that Donnie could inherit the tenancy after him, this land which his grandfather had tilled, was to become the leisure haven for a rich man, and Ewan and his family were likely to starve.

'Ewan . . . Ewan . . . In the name! What are you doing there?' Beth had been searching for him frantically, to tell him that a group of men had been spotted approaching the croft. There were several hours to go before the bailiffs were due to arrive, but they had been known to turn up

early on such occasions, to see what they could pick up in bribes from the hapless victims. They would get precious little from this sorry pile, thought Beth.

She viewed their few household goods with dismay. It was little enough for three generations of Johnstones to have amassed during their occupation. At least they would have little difficulty finding shelter for their possessions!

The men entered the yard, and Beth breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that it was Archie and Donnie who headed the group.

Archie's approach jerked his brother out of his reverie.

'This is a sorry business, Ewan, and no mistake,' observed Archie. 'I have brought a few mates along to help gather the stock. What about your crops, are the tatties not ready for lifting?'

Ewan looked around him desperately.

'See, in the fields along the bank here . . . potatoes, neeps, cabbage, kale. All will go to waste for there is no time to lift anything. I would have been cutting the grain in the next few days.'

'If we begin right away,' said Archie, optimistically, 'we could clear some of these plots before the bailiffs come. You need not lose everything.'

Jaunty McFarlain had joined them. 'Surely they are obliged to give you time to harvest your crops?' he declared.

Ewan shook his head. 'Not according to the notice,' he replied. 'It seems that because we did not have to pay the increased rent last year, it does not mean that we are excused this. Since my payment last quarter day was in arrears, they have every right to repossess without further warning.'

'Then,' announced Archie, 'if they will not give us time to gather the harvest, we will make it!'

The remainder of the quarrymen, some eight or nine men all told, had gathered around the brothers.

Archie outlined the plan which had been forming in his mind during their march up the glen. For a time the others seemed sceptical, but slowly first one, then another, joined

in with some suggestion to improve the scheme, and soon all were eager to begin their preparations.

'Ewan, do you go on about the business of gathering the tatties,' Archie proposed. 'Young Donnie here, and Beth too, can help you. Make sure that you are in clear view of the top of the brae, so that you are not implicated if there should be trouble.'

Beth suspected that there would indeed be a great deal of trouble. In order to save her husband's hard-won harvest, however . . . well, she would not be the one to stop these brave and foolish men.

The party of quarrymen hastened along the loch shore and up the brae towards the head of the pass. There was only one road into the valley. If they could build a barrier across the path and find cover for themselves, they might be able to halt the sheriff's men who would be protecting the bailiffs. They had no weapons but the stones at their feet and their own hands, but these were hard men, muscles strengthened by a lifetime in the quarries. They would prove tough adversaries, even against the sheriff's men!

David planted his medical bag on William's desk, and sank into the chair which the Quarry Manager had indicated. Without asking, William poured the doctor a dram and set the glass on the desk at David's elbow.

'Nothing too serious,' David declared, draining the glass in one swallow. He felt chilled to the marrow, having spent the past hour in driving rain on the quarry floor. 'Your man dislocated a shoulder, which I have reduced satisfactorily, and there were a few cuts and scratches. A very lucky young fellow, considering the distance he fell!'

'Will he be off work for long?' William could ill afford to be without skilled workers at the moment. An order for a shipment of roofing slates for Valparaiso had put new life into the Eisdalsa quarries, but if the terms of the contract were to be fulfilled without penalties, his men would have to produce another twenty thousand sizeables, and get them all

loaded aboard the *Empress of China* by the end of the month. Fortunately there was already a good stockpile of made slates, most of them Countess and Duchess sizes. Denny McPherson was one of his better crewmen, able to produce a thousand slates in a good week. It would be disastrous if he were laid up for any length of time.

'Oh, I think that a few days' rest is all he'll be needing,' David reassured his friend. 'Send him over to me on Monday, and I'll see if I can give him a clean bill of health.'

There was a sharp rap on the office door. Without waiting for an invitation to enter, Sergeant Kinross stepped across the threshold and forced the door closed against the wind. He shook himself, like a dog emerging from the river, and pools of water gathered about his feet.

'My apologies for interrupting, gentlemen,' he addressed them abruptly. 'I have come about the unfortunate death of Mr Peter Lugas who was, I believe, one of your employees, Mr Whylie?'

'That is not strictly true,' he replied. 'Mr Lugas performed work on behalf of the villagers, particularly during the epidemic last year. He has, from time to time, carried out certain work for the Company, but he was not a permanent employee, no.'

'Nevertheless, you knew the gentleman well?' the officer persisted.

'As well as anyone, I suppose.' William exchanged glances with David. 'He was a very private man.'

'Would you say that he was a man to make enemies?' Kinross's tone was polite, but his eyes were sharp, glancing from one to the other of the two gentlemen for any sign of a reaction to his question.

David, uncomfortable at the manner of the interrogation, asked quietly, 'May we know the purpose of your question?'

'We have reason to believe that the deceased may have been the victim of foul play.'

Both William and David rose simultaneously at this news.

'I understood that Mr Lugas drowned in Loch Fyne,' said David. 'An accident, by all accounts.'

'That was the first impression,' agreed the sergeant. 'Since then it has been brought to my attention that the deceased exchanged harsh words with a certain gentleman, prior to his . . . accident.'

'You have witnesses to this confrontation?' William asked.

'Yes, indeed,' replied the officer. 'Mr Lugas was observed conversing with Jack McDougal. Strong language was used, concerning the fate of that unfortunate young woman, Mr McDougal's sister.'

'I see,' David said, thoughtfully. There was no denying that Jack McDougal had been in a very distressed state after his sister's sentencing. It was possible that he would have responded angrily to any remarks made about her.

'Where did this encounter take place?' William enquired.

'In the Argyll Inn in Inverary, soon after the trial ended.' Kinross explained, 'McDougal was overheard threatening Mr Lugas. Not long afterwards, the deceased left the inn. McDougal was seen to follow him out.'

'At what time is it alleged that the meeting occurred?' David was leaning on the desk, anticipating the officer's answer.

'A little after nine o'clock in the evening,' replied Kinross. 'I have a witness can swear to the time, says he remembers it very particularly.'

'Then,' declared David, 'your witness is mistaken, or else deliberately lying. Jack McDougal was picked up by the Oban Flyer at Clachan, on Loch Aweside, soon after nine on that same evening. How could he have been in both places at once?'

'Are you sure of this, Doctor?' The sergeant looked both mystified and embarrassed.

'I should be,' David declared, 'for I was aboard the coach myself, along with a number of Eisdalsa men who would have recognised McDougal. But if you do not believe me, ask independent witnesses . . . there were two strangers aboard. Very put out they were, that the coach took the

southern shore for Eisdalsa, rather than going via Taynuilt to Oban.'

'Would you happen to know where these two gentlemen are at present?' the sergeant enquired. 'Just to confirm the time that Mr McDougal boarded the coach, you understand,' he added hastily, not wishing to cause David any offence.

'They went on to Oban from here, the next morning,' David explained. 'I have no idea where they were bound, or for what purpose.'

'Well now, Doctor,' Kinross scratched his head in bemused fashion, 'here is the Factor's man, James Fisk, saying that he saw the two of them leaving the inn at nine o'clock on the evening of Lugas's death; and here are you, saying that McDougal was at Clachan at that very same hour. There is no person from the inn, other than Fisk, can remember what he was doing himself that night, let alone being able to say who did or did not leave before him, and at what hour.'

'But,' interrupted David, 'there were a half dozen Eisdalsa men and women aboard the coach who welcomed Jack McDougal's broad shoulders when it came to forcing the coach over Kilninver brae.'

'Yes,' muttered the sergeant reflectively. 'It is little thanks I shall be getting from the sheriff if I go to the procurator fiscal with this story, and no witnesses to prove the guilt of the accused party.'

'It would seem,' William summed up the situation with typical pragmatism, 'that there are more witnesses available to show that McDougal could not have murdered Lugas than there are those to prove him guilty.'

'Just so, Mr Whylie,' agreed the sergeant. 'It seems that I must thank you, Doctor, for preventing me from making a fool of myself.'

The sergeant turned on his heel and went to the door. He approached it cautiously, hesitated for a moment as he measured the force of the wind opposing him, then thrust it open and disappeared into the gloomy twilight.

Instead of turning to his right and proceeding towards the McDougals' croft, he turned left, making his way around the harbour and back to the ferry.

On the far side of the channel, Kinross's horse had been enjoying the shelter of the blacksmith's stable. The sergeant led the beast out, paid his dues, and swung himself into the saddle. He had time to call in at the Castle before begging a supper and a night's lodging from his sister at Kilmartin. The sooner he scotched this rumour about Jack McDougal murdering Peter Lugas, the better. He wondered if he had sufficient grounds for bringing a case of conspiracy to divert the course of justice, against James Fisk!

The survey had been completed two days ago, but Alexander Lugas had persuaded his guests to remain to enjoy a little rough shooting, and even showed them the best stretch of sea loch in which to cast for brown trout. He had hoped that in a relaxed atmosphere, and with a feeling of obligation towards their host, the two visitors would reveal, albeit inadvertently, the name of their patron. Both men were very adept at changing the subject whenever the matter was raised, however, and on the morning of their departure, Lugas was as much in the dark as ever.

The coachman had the chaise drawn up in the courtyard, ready to take Farley and Platt to the railway station in Oban. It seemed that their employer had insisted they come to Seileach by road, to get the true feel of the country. Farley had had enough of the rural life and could not get back to London fast enough. Lugas felt that Platt, the surveyor, had responded more favourably towards his experience of Argyll, and might welcome an opportunity for a further visit.

With one final attempt he bade his visitors farewell with, 'My compliments to your patron, gentlemen. I shall look forward to making his acquaintance, in due course!'

'Thank you for your hospitality,' Farley replied stiffly.

Platt, who had unwound considerably in the past forty-eight hours, leaned out of the carriage to shake Lugas's hand.

'Thank you, sir,' he exclaimed warmly, 'I hope to see you again very soon.'

Lugas stood back, to allow the driver to manoeuvre the chaise out through the narrow archway which gave access to the flagged courtyard. As he did so, Sergeant Kinross clattered into the yard and reined in his horse.

'Good day to you, sir!' The policeman touched his cap deferentially to Lugas. 'I am glad to have caught up with you.'

'A moment, if you please, Sergeant.' Lugas motioned him to silence. 'I was just about to witness the departure of my guests.'

Kinross eyed the two men speculatively. At this time of the year, businessmen were rarely seen on Seileach. These two were obviously not the usual run of tourists who flocked to every hamlet along the western shore, during the Glasgow fair.

'Forgive me, gentlemen,' he addressed the two strangers, 'I shall try not to delay you overlong. Were you passengers aboard the Oban Flyer, five nights ago?'

'A journey it would be hard to overlook,' muttered Farley. 'Every mile of the way is stamped indelibly upon my mind!'

'Did your coach pick up any additional passengers after leaving Inverary?' Kinross persisted.

'There was a young man boarded, after we turned along the southern shore of Loch Awe,' volunteered Platt. 'It was fortunate that he was there, for without his strength I doubt if we would have reached the summit of at least one of the hills along the road!'

'Did the young man give you his name, by any chance?' enquired the officer.

'It was not an occasion for introductions,' Farley responded, irritated at the delay.

'The doctor called him "Jack" several times,' Platt offered.

'What did he look like, this young man?' Kinross believed that David's story was corroborated, but he had to be certain.

'That is difficult to say. We only saw him as a shadowy figure in the dark.' Platt thought for a few moments. 'He

was immensely strong, heavily featured, with thick black hair. From the way the doctor addressed him, I would say he was a farmer rather than a quarry worker.'

'Did you hear the name McDougal mentioned at all?'

'Was that not the name of the young woman who killed her child?' asked Farley. 'The whole coach was buzzing with the story. It seemed that most of the passengers had been to Inverary for the trial.'

Kinross sighed. Still he had no proper independent confirmation that Jack McDougal had been aboard the Flyer that night.

Francis Farley, despairing of ever catching the train to get him out of this dreary place once and for all, now turned his mind to the events of that journey.

'I recall, as we got our breath after struggling up that final hill, one of the men put his hand on the young fellow's shoulder and said how sorry he was about the sentence given to his sister.'

'To his sister?' Kinross persisted. 'You are sure that that was what he said?'

'Quite sure!' Farley tapped the driver on the shoulder. 'Now, my man, make haste or we shall miss the train.'

The carriage was gone before the policeman could make any protest. He turned to Alexander Lugas who had listened to this exchange with a puzzled frown on his face.

'I have to tell you, Mr Lugas, that your man Fisk has caused me a great deal of work to no purpose.'

'I have no notion what you are talking about, Kinross,' replied the Factor.

'James Fisk reported seeing Jack McDougal follow your son out of the inn, on the night that he died. Several witnesses, including your two companions there, have confirmed that at the time that Fisk claims McDougal murdered Peter Lugas, he was boarding the Oban Flyer, five miles north of Inverary!'

Alexander Lugas's face looked like thunder.

'By God!' he cried. 'Am I never to hear the last of this affair? It is bad enough that my son turned out to be such

a disappointment to us, but to have scandal surrounding his death . . . it will kill my wife.' The sudden awareness of all that he and Alicia had lost threatened to undermine his composure.

'I have now concluded my investigation, Mr Lugas,' the sergeant confided, 'and am satisfied that your son's death was accidental. That is the report I shall make to the procurator fiscal. I think you may safely assume that there will be no further action in this matter.'

'Thank you, Sergeant,' Lugas exclaimed with relief. 'I assume that I may now proceed with arrangements for my son's funeral?'

'The remains will be released as soon as I return to Inverary, sir.'

The sergeant prepared to leave.

'Though there might be a charge to be made against Mr Fisk,' he pronounced. 'The man appears to have lied in order to lay the blame at Jack McDougal's door. It is a criminal offence to attempt to pervert the course of justice.'

'Will you allow me to deal with it, Sergeant?' pleaded Lugas. 'I can assure you, he will never be tempted to repeat such folly.'

'Well, sir,' Kinross replied magnanimously, 'least said, soonest mended in this case. If you will give him a dressing down that will suit me, and Mrs Lugas will not have to contend with a public enquiry into the man's motives.'

Chapter 4

Jack shrugged off his wet jacket and hung it over the wooden peg beside the door. He was startled when he turned to see a figure crouched in the chair beside the range. For a moment, he thought . . . but it was not his sister, Ellen, who had sat in that very place for ten years past. It was his mother, Katrina, huddled by the fire, rocking to and fro, staring into the glowing embers.

'Is there no' a dish o' tea in the pot, Ma?' he called jovially, hoping against hope for a reply, but expecting none.

Katrina stopped rocking for an instant, in recognition of the interruption, but then she started again . . . back and forth . . . back and forth.

Jack made his own tea, and poured some for his mother at the same time. She took the cup from him without a word, folding her hands about it as though it alone could save her from the cruel chills which numbed her.

Katrina had little recollection of the long walk home from Inverary. She and John had spent the night under her sister's roof, and set out in the early dawn of the following day, arriving at the croft late in the evening. Despite the fact that Jack had preceded them by twenty-four hours and had a good fire going, the house had felt cold and empty. It would always be so for Katrina.

Jack found himself some bread and cheese, all the while chatting cheerfully, always hoping for a response.

'The tatties are looking well in the plot down by the shore,' he told her. 'Two pounds at least from each plant, there is.'

He waited. Only the creaking rockers replied.

'Pa is gathering kelp this morning,' he persisted. 'He would

like fine to have you there to help him load the skips. I'd go myself but there's the cows to milk and the chooks to clean out. Of course, if you were to do the chooks, I'd help him myself . . .'

He had hoped an appeal on behalf of his father would rouse her. She had always been the stronger member of the partnership, shielding her man from the blows of misfortune, shouldering the heaviest burdens. Now, however, even the thought of her husband struggling alone could not spur her into activity. It was as though she was lost in another dimension.

Jack cleared the remnants of his meal and stoked up the fire. He was on his way out again when the door burst open and there stood his sister, Martha. He sighed with relief. She had never been more welcome.

'What a day!' she exclaimed, setting down the overstuffed carpet bag she had carried up from the quay. 'I have rarely seen the sea so rough in September! And what a journey I have had, to be sure. There's trouble up at Johnstone's croft . . . evicting the poor man, so they are. Archie Johnstone is there, with some of the Eisdalsa men. I don't know what they are planning, but they have built a barrier across at the head of the pass and look set to defend it!'

She collapsed in a chair and took the cup which her brother offered her. The tea was stewed, and not very warm, but she swallowed it thankfully.

'Where was Ewan?' Jack demanded. 'Did you see him and Beth at all?'

'They were down by the croft, gathering in the crops as far as I could see. The beasts were barricaded in the yard, as though they were getting ready to bring them away.'

'They will need help herding the flock,' Jack observed, reaching for his shepherd's crook as he spoke. 'I will go and see if I can help. Will you tell Pa when he comes back from the shore? And keep an eye on . . .' He nodded towards their mother, who remained rocking to and fro.

'She is no better then?' Martha, long accustomed to nursing

the sick, took her mother's condition in her stride. Seeing the look of despair on her brother's face, she attempted to give him some comfort.

'Now, just you be off and try to help them as needs it,' she commanded. 'Ma will be all right with me.'

When Martha had heard the terms of her late employer's will, she had sat down and cried with relief. Major Lovat's small pension from the army died with him, and his house was leased with only a few months remaining of the tenancy. There were, however, some small savings deposited in the bank, and the contents of the household included some good pieces of furniture. Apart from bequests of certain items of porcelain to Annabel and Elizabeth, the remainder of his estate had been left to his housekeeper, Martha McDougal.

Martha's return to the family home was fortuitous, not only because of her mother's illness but because her small but regular income from the Major's bequest could spell the difference between starvation and survival for the whole family, during the coming winter.

She bustled about the tiny cottage, soon returning it to a condition which would have passed scrutiny in the days when her mother set the standards. She climbed the ladder to the loft, and established herself in the corner she had occupied as a child. It was clear that her mother now slept in the closet bed, so long inhabited by Ellen. The men had their pallets at the far end of the roof space.

For decency, she tied a string between the rafters and found an old cover to act as a curtain. Her clothing would have to stay in the carpet bag for now. When Jack had the time to accompany her, she would go back to the Major's cottage and remove what remained of the furniture.

Ian had already taken a bed and chest, table and chairs, to furnish the room he had been allocated by his employer at Ballachuan House. Her son was doing well, according to the head gardener, and there was no reason to remove the lad, just because she, herself, was obliged to return to Eisdalsa.

By the time that John McDougal had finished gathering the

kelp, Martha had a good fire going, a pot of broth bubbling on the stove and the crude, but cleanly scrubbed table set for the evening meal. John lowered his weary body into the chair opposite his wife and sighed thankfully. Their circumstances could only get better now that Martha was here to take care of things.

With his two dogs at his heels, Jack McDougal made short work of the journey to Johnstone's croft. By taking the steep path up beside the schoolhouse, he could cut off more than a mile from the route taken that afternoon by his sister.

Once on the cliff top, he could look down into the next bay, where Ballachuan House sheltered in a wooded valley. This cutting through volcanic rocks was made by a skittish burn which emptied out of Loch Bahcain. Over to the right he saw the loch itself, and Johnstone's neat fields stretched out along its shore.

His heart sank. Throughout his boyhood, Ewan Johnstone had been held up to him as a model to be emulated, his orderly fields an example for all crofters in the region.

'If you are ever half the farmer that is Ewan Johnstone,' his father would say, 'I shall be more than proud of ye.'

Keen for the boy to learn all that the crofter could teach him about sheep, John McDougal had sent his son off to work with Ewan Johnstone for the first year after he left school. Only when the boy returned to Eisdalsa did John approach the Factor for permission to run sheep on the uninhabited island of Uan.

It was Ewan who had taught the young Jack to care for the feet of the ewes, so often rotted in the wet heather on Uan Island. Ewan had shown him how to hold the shears, and watched as he cut his very first fleece. It was at Ewan's side that Jack had witnessed his first lambing, and wondered at the marvel of new life emerging.

Calling the dogs to heel, the young farmer started down the steep-sided valley and approached the croft from the seaward end. He saw no sign of the men gathered at the head of the

pass, and they were unaware of his presence at the croft.

While Ewan and Beth struggled to lift the potatoes and pile them on to the single cart owned by the farmer, Jack took Donnie and the dogs and set off to gather in the flock, scattered over the hillside.

Down through the heather came the woolly-backs, their agitated bleating filling the air. Pushing and shoving, their black faces thrust up, white feet scrabbling on their neighbours' backs, they crammed through the gate into the yard. Pink tongues lolling, lips drawn back in satisfied grimaces, the two black and white collies lay down in the path and waited for any foolhardy animal to move.

Up at the pass, Archie had posted young Noah Fraser to watch for any sign of bailiffs approaching from the main road. Saplings had been cut from a stand of willows by the loch, and woven into thin hurdles which could be used to close the road. Small stones had been piled at either side, where overhanging rocks and fallen boulders provided some shelter. Each man had armed himself with a stave, though none possessed any proper weapons, for Archie had expressly forbidden the use of arms. To inhibit the bailiffs, and gain time for Ewan to clear his crops, was one thing. To take up arms against officers of the law was a hanging offence.

Six o'clock came and went. Another half an hour passed and there was still no sign of the expected contingent.

Then, when the quarrymen were beginning to suspect that their efforts had been unnecessary, the lookout signalled the approach of the bailiff's party.

It had been a long trek from the sheriff's office at Aberfeldy. When the men had reached the hump-backed bridge which linked Seileach to the mainland, they reined in their horses and dismounted, allowing the beasts to breathe a while, and drink from the trough provided.

It was a short step from there to the tavern, which stood on the bank, close beside the bridge.

Several tankards of ale later, the leader of the group called his men to order, and it was a merry band which approached

the pass as the sun began to set in the western sky.

Noah Fraser had been only too willing to join the rest of Fergus McVicar's crew on this expedition of mercy. Not an aggressive boy by nature, he was nevertheless excited by the idea of confrontation in a righteous cause. Although Archie Johnstone had stipulated that they should carry no weapons, Noah was unable to resist taking his grandfather's flintlock pistol from its hiding place, in the chimney corner. There were no balls, and the powder-flask was empty, but the feel of the weapon, thrust deep within his coat pocket, gave him a strong sensation of well-being as he watched in the chill evening for a sign of someone approaching.

There was something down by the crossroads. A flash of colour . . . a glint of steel perhaps, caught by the setting sun?

The boy waited a moment, counting the men in the group, before scurrying back to the head of the pass.

'They're coming,' he cried excitedly.

Archie clamped his huge hand over the youngster's mouth.

'Hush, lad,' he commanded hoarsely. 'Sound carries up here. We don't want them to know about this reception committee until the very last moment.'

'How many men were there?' asked Fergus, seeing the look of mortification on the boy's face.

Brightening, Noah replied confidently, 'I counted eight horses.'

'Well done.' Fergus placed his hand on the lad's shoulder in friendly fashion, then motioned him to take his position up on the bank, alongside the pass.

The bailiff's party reached the top of the hill, forming into a single file where the road narrowed. Their leader's horse shied and halted abruptly as a shadowy figure rose up directly in his path.

Archie Johnstone's great height and enormous bulk made him a menacing figure in the gloaming, silhouetted against the setting sun.'

The two bailiffs leading the horsemen were ordinary civil servants going about their lawful duties. When Archie commanded that they stop, they obeyed him without argument.

Bringing up the rear were six officers from the sheriff's court. It was their duty to enforce the law, by whatever means. They had no compunction about using force, if necessary. It was Archie's good fortune that the two civilians blocked the path between himself and the first of the constables.

'Let us pass, my good man,' demanded the first bailiff. 'We have official duties to perform in the valley below.'

'I know what those duties are,' Archie stated, his voice loud and firm. 'I am here to plead the cause of Ewan Johnstone who has been given but twelve hours to quit his farm.'

'Mr Johnstone has had a full two years to clear his deficit,' insisted the bailiff. 'By order of the court, I am here to evict him.'

'His crops are lying in the fields, waiting to be harvested,' Archie cried angrily. 'Will you not give him forty-eight hours in which to clear the ground?'

'I have my orders, sir. Stand aside, or you will be arrested for interfering with the course of justice!' As the bailiff spoke, his horse was edged to one side by the dismounted sergeant of police who, red-faced and sweating, had been obliged to force his not inconsiderable bulk between the rock wall and the horses.

'Leave this to me, sir,' the policeman blustered. He stumbled against Archie, and the quarrier was not pleased to be assailed by an unpleasant alcoholic blast as the man belched loudly.

Half supporting, half thrusting the officer from him, Archie took a few paces backwards. It was quite dark now that the sun had finally disappeared behind the outer islands.

'If you will not give the farmer a fair amount of time,' he shouted, 'then we will take it!'

So saying, Archie Johnstone disappeared into the shadows cast at the turn of the path.

The sergeant called for his horse to be brought forward, and there was a scuffling of hooves and a swearing of men

as the officers positioned themselves ahead of the civilians.

Remounted, the sergeant moved forwards, rounding the bluff at the head of the pass. His horse reared as it met the solid barrier of hurdles in its path, nearly unseating the intoxicated officer.

At that moment, at a signal from Archie, stones rained down on the horsemen crowded into the narrow passage. Animals screamed, men shouted . . . those in front tried to turn back, those behind tried to move forward to see what was happening.

Finally, the sergeant's mount decided it had had enough. It turned and forced its way back down the road, scraping its rider's thigh painfully on the jutting rocks at the side of the track.

The space thus created allowed others to follow, and soon the whole party had reassembled below the pass.

Leaving the bailiffs to follow them, once the barrier was down, the policemen again rode up the path. Knowing now what they had to face, their tactics were altered. While the sergeant and two men took the main path, the remainder dismounted. These three climbed the cliff, alongside the path, in the hope of encountering and arresting the stone-throwers. In this respect they were successful. The first figure they found was crouching in the heather, a pile of pebbles at his side. With a deft stroke of the truncheon, the man was knocked cold.

Their second success was to overpower Noah Fraser who, inspired by the success of the earlier ambush, stood up against the skyline, poised to hurl his cache of stones down upon the approaching horsemen. The officers had him gagged and bound before he could give any warning to his comrades.

If the sergeant had had more patience, all the defenders of the pass might have been dealt with in like manner. The sergeant, however, was inflamed with frustration and an excess of whisky, and could contain himself no longer. With a wild cry he raced his horse up the steep incline and approached the barrier, determined to jump it. At the last minute the horse pecked in his stride. The sergeant, parted

from his saddle, flew over the wattle fence, and crashed into a softly yielding, very wet, sphagnum bog. Winded, he lay there while his men were pelted with more stones. At last they were forced to give way. They turned and fled, taking with them the riderless horse.

Suddenly all was quiet.

Archie was sure that the intruders would not return again before daylight. While the sergeant might be winded badly, he was unlikely to be severely injured. The quarrymen could melt away into the night without anyone being able to identify them.

Indicating his intention to withdraw, Archie scurried away across the heather, making for the shelter of the willows beside the loch.

Meanwhile, in the farmyard, having collected up all the sheep, Jack was preparing to bed down for the night beside them. He wrapped his plaid about him, huddling for warmth in the shelter of the wall. Confident that his dogs would give warning if strangers approached, he slept.

Only when the quarrymen had gathered in the farmhouse kitchen, did they realise they were missing two of their number. Tom Stobbart and Noah Fraser had not returned with them.

James Fisk was going about his normal duties, still smarting from the tirade of harsh and unjustified criticism showered upon him that afternoon by his master.

He had approached the Castle in high spirits, assured of a kindly reception from Peter's parents. Had he not upheld the good name of the family by accusing Jack McDougal of murder? Would they not be relieved to know that their son had died neither through carelessness nor by his own hand.

After all, James ruminated sourly now as he strode away from the Castle towards the grouse moors, I told no lies. Jack did follow Peter Lugas out of the tavern. How was I to know that the Factor's son did not drown until McDougal was well on his way home?

Constable McPhail had been only too pleased to accept Fisk's statement at the time. It was only after two members of McAllister's crew recalled hearing a splash and a yell, around midnight, that Sergeant Kinross declared McPhail's suspicions to be unfounded, and dismissed Fisk's evidence as of no consequence.

Afterwards, the doctor's report was to reveal that the body had been in the water for too short a time for Peter to have drowned before midnight.

While Fisk had made his return to the Castle on foot, Kinross had dispatched this final confirmation of accidental death directly to Alexander Lugas, by steamer. Thus it was that when Fisk had presented himself at the Castle and demanded an audience with his employer, he received a sharp blow to his self-esteem.

'Well, Fisk, what is it?' Alexander Lugas had demanded, none too pleased to be interrupted by his gamekeeper.

'I have news concerning the death of Master Peter, sir. A matter of some moment. Circumstances which you should be made acquainted with . . .'

'Well,' Alexander had barked at him, 'get on with it, man. If you know something of the matter, I will hear it!'

The ghillie had explained how he had notified the young constable of the argument between Jack McDougal and the Factor's son. He gave details of the evidence compiled against Jack McDougal and stood back, a self-satisfied expression on his face.

'Oh,' roared Lugas, much to the consternation of his servant, 'so it was you who set this cat amongst the pigeons, was it?'

'But, sir . . .' began Fisk.

'Do you not think that Mrs Lugas and I have enough grief to bear without being subjected to cross-examination by the constable? Not to mention the inconvenience to our honoured guests who were delayed in their departure because they were obliged to answer the sergeant's queries?'

Fisk had blanched. This was not at all the conversation he

had anticipated. Here he was, on the verge of demanding a promotion on the strength of his loyalty and support for his employer's interests, only to find himself the object of his master's displeasure.

'This is a message delivered via the steamer not an hour ago.' Lugas waved the document in the hapless ghillie's face. 'It is the official report of Sergeant Kinross to the procurator fiscal. It would appear that after extensive and somewhat unnecessarily protracted enquiries, the police can find no evidence to suggest that my son died by any other than accidental means. You are not mentioned by name in this report, Fisk,' he continued, 'but it is quite clear to me that had you kept your imaginings to yourself, this matter would have been over and done with days ago.

'My poor grieving wife has quite enough to contend with without the added burden of uncertainty about the boy's death. I suggest you take yourself out of my sight now, before I reconsider your position in my employment!'

Fisk had left abruptly, without even exchanging the usual pleasantries with Mrs Meecham. He was mortified, and he was angry. Angry with Constable McPhail, angry with Alexander Lugas, but most of all, angry with Jack McDougal. All three had conspired to make a fool of him . . . well, they would discover what it meant to cross swords with James Fisk!

There was a disturbance up on the hill, near the head of the pass. James halted in his stride. The night was full of sounds: a clashing of staves, pounding of stones upon stones, the cries of men and the shrieks of frightened horses.

The ghillie made his way stealthily through the heather, instinctively travelling downwind of the fray. He soon came upon two men, lying beside the path, trussed like chickens. Without revealing himself, he crept close enough to identify the captives. The larger was a quarryman whose name he did not know; the smaller figure was none other than Dorothy Fraser's lad, Noah.

He heard a cough and a murmured exchange, and noticed,

for the first time, two gentlemen standing in the shadows, each grasping his horse's halter, as though waiting for a command to mount.

Fisk melted into the darkness and, keeping the road on his left hand, climbed to the crest of the hill. From a point of vantage, he witnessed the unseating of the sergeant of police, and the subsequent dispersal of his officers. Then, realising that the protagonists were making off towards the loch, he followed, hoping to catch up with them before they disappeared.

James Fisk knew every boulder and gully, every coppice and burn in this valley. In darkness or light, he could move faster than the quarriers who were unfamiliar with the territory.

Assuming, correctly, that the men were bound for Johnstone's croft, James took a direct path, arriving in time to find suitable cover for himself long before the first of the quarrymen arrived.

He did not recognise them all, but that was certainly Archie Johnstone's voice, ordering his companions inside the farmhouse. The big man he recognised as Fergus McVicar, and no doubt one of the others would be Ewan Johnstone, the crofter himself.

As he crouched beside the stone wall which encompassed the yard, Fisk became aware of a gentle snoring coming from close by. Cautiously, he raised his head and shoulders above the wall, and looked down upon the sleeping form of Jack McDougal. The collie, lying across the farmer's feet, raised his head enquiringly and gave a warning growl deep down in his throat.

The ghillie made a sound in the language of the countryman. The collie panted a little, wagged his tail indecisively, and then replaced his head upon his master's feet, satisfied that the intruder intended no harm.

Fisk sank down below the wall and waited until all was quiet once more in the farmyard.

Then, silently, he slipped away, and made for the high moors where his traps were set.

The bailiffs did not return during the following week. Johnstone, with the help of men, women and children from the village, gathered in his crops and transported them to a storehouse on the quay at Eisdalsa.

Jack McDougal, with young Donnie and the dogs, moved the sheep across the lower slopes of Ben Mhor and down to the shore, from whence they were ferried across to Uan Island.

By the Friday, not an ear of barley nor a single root vegetable remained on Johnstone's croft. The beasts were all gone, and the house stood empty.

Ewan, his wife and bairns were lodged with cousins in the village. The milch cow had sailed across to the island to join those retained to provide milk for the quarrymen's families. The stock cattle, three healthy yearlings, were slaughtered, and every man, woman and child in the district enjoyed the rare luxury of beef in their puddings and pies for a few days.

On Saturday, they buried Peter Lugas.

Whatever the people of Eisdalsa had thought about the last months of Peter Lugas's life, however much they may have abhorred his bouts of drunkenness, and his steady decline into debauchery, at his wake they remembered only his great service to the community in a time of trial.

The coffin arrived aboard the steamer from Crinan, having been sailed down Loch Fyne and through the canal by a local fishing smack.

The appearance of Jo McQueen's hearse signified the importance placed upon the occasion. Its glass walls and lacquered coachwork glittered in the pale autumnal sunshine. Black ostrich plumes waved on the brow-bands of the sleek black stallions which waited expectantly, ears pricked, between the shafts.

Islanders, gathered beside the steamer pier, selected from their number six stout quarrymen to board the vessel and disembark the coffin.

The hearse set off on its two-mile journey, by road over the brae and along the spine of Seileach to St Brendan's church. The mourners fell in behind, silent and respectful in their dark Sunday clothes.

As the procession wound its way through the village and out on to the coast road, the numbers swelled. When it passed the gate to Tigh na Broch, David Beaton and his second son, Stuart, joined the men in front of the hearse. When the crowd had thinned a little, the doctor's chaise, carrying Annabel, her mother-in-law Morag, and Elizabeth McIntyre, drew out into the road and fell in behind.

As the company spread out along the road, some champing to be ahead of the procession, others struggling to keep up with the stragglers, it was possible for Elizabeth, seated beside the driver, to distinguish individuals in the crowd.

Many faces she recognised: parents of her pupils, members of the parish council, workers from His Lordship's estates.

There were others amongst the tail-enders who were strangers to the village, young and middle-aged men, several in colourful garments unsuitable for the occasion. The schoolmistress wondered idly who they might be. Friends of Peter's perhaps, from earlier, happier days in Edinburgh? How they must respect his memory, to have come such a distance to his funeral.

As it neared the top of the brae, the procession slowed, allowing the stragglers to catch up with the main party. It was not until the chaise had topped the rise, and was descending to join the main road to the church, that Elizabeth realised that the group of strangers which had so interested her had disappeared.

The eulogy given by the Reverend McCulloch was full of praise for a life of service. Peter's contribution to the welfare of the villagers during the cholera epidemic was still fresh in many minds.

Anne McGillivray, who had once anticipated that Peter Lugas would be her son-in-law, wept as pictures of Kirsty and the young man together flooded her memory. Beside her,

Dougal remembered an arrogant schoolfellow whose one claim to Dougal's respect lay in his championship of his cousin, Mary.

Dougal glanced sideways at the Minister's daughter, and seeing tears glistening beneath her eyelashes, squeezed her hand comfortingly.

Across the aisle, Alexander Lugas sat stiffly erect, grey eyes dry, his features betraying nothing of the emotion he felt. Beside him, heavily veiled in black, Alicia bowed her head, her shoulders shaking with her quiet sobbing. Alexander placed his gloved hand over hers, but it was to the comforting figure of the housekeeper, Mrs Meecham, that Alicia turned for support.

From the kirk on the hill to the tiny cemetery at the crossroads they carried Peter.

Alexander, as chief mourner, held the leading rope as the men lowered the coffin into the ground. It was small service for a father to perform on behalf of his child. If only things had been different between them.

He recalled the pride he had felt when they placed the new-born baby in his arms. He saw again the tiny boy, stumbling towards him, arms thrown wide in greeting. He remembered the accusation in the schoolboy's eyes, and recognised his own part in the forming of a barrier between them. Alicia was right. The blame was his, all his.

With curt acknowledgement of the many expressions of sympathy, Alexander Lugas propelled his wife towards his carriage which waited at the gate of the kirkyard. He handed her in, and turned to lend assistance to Mrs Meecham.

'Take care of your mistress,' he instructed. 'I have business to attend to before I return to the Castle.'

Two days ago, Lugas had received a visit from the sergeant of police sent out from Aberfeldy to assist the bailiffs in the eviction of the crofter. When he heard of the resistance which they had encountered at the pass, he could barely hide his amusement. These Eisdalsa men were tough characters when

their passions were aroused, and nothing was more likely to inflame them than a threat to one of their own!

It was at this meeting that Lugas had counselled the sergeant to bide his time until the following Saturday. Knowing that most of the populace would be at the kirk on that day, he had considered it unlikely that the bailiffs would meet with any further resistance.

As he emerged from the narrow pass and began his descent towards the loch, Lugas could see men running hither and thither in a disorganised fashion about the croft and its environs.

In the middle of the yard, the unmistakable figure of Mr Patrick Campbell, the Marquis's cousin, could be observed, shouting unheeded commands and waving his arms about like a windmill.

As Alexander approached, it became clear what all the fuss was about. Yard, steadings and house were clearly deserted. Not a beast was to be found, not a stick of furniture had been left behind.

The Factor cast his eye along the neat row of cultivated plots where he might have expected to see barley cut and stooked, potato clamps freshly turfed, green vegetables standing in military rows.

The fields were as barren as the yard was bare. Every last item that could be utilised had been removed. There was no booty for the sheriff's men, or for the representative of His Lordship, the Marquis of Stirling!

'Here's a pretty kettle of fish, Lugas,' blurted out the red faced Campbell, mopping his freely perspiring brow. 'You advised the bailiffs to wait, did you not? You therefore must be held responsible for this!' He waved his arm, indicating the empty fields and stockless pens.

'As I understand it,' Lugas replied icily, 'your interest was in clearing the land, in order to make ready for its new tenant. What use will stock and crops be to one who intends building a house and constructing an ornamental garden?'

'You know as well as I that the rules state that the departing

tenant may take only that which he can carry away with him on the day of eviction.' The enraged Campbell was by now purple in the face, and seemed on the verge of an apoplexy.

'There are no restrictions upon the dispersal of goods and stock before the day of eviction, however,' Alexander Lugas pointed out smoothly. 'Had your men succeeded in their task at the first attempt, I suspect there would have been no opportunity for Johnstone to remove everything. Perhaps they should have arrived earlier in the day for without doubt darkness played an important part in the defence of the pass!'

He had listened carefully to reports coming in from the district of events on that night nearly a week ago. He knew of the protracted visit to the tavern at the bridge, and had been told of the precipitate manner in which the sergeant had charged the barricade, contributing to his own humiliation and to the success of the defence. The party had behaved stupidly and if, as a result, Campbell was not about to line his pockets from the proceeds of confiscated goods, Alexander Lugas for one was more than pleased.

Seeing that there was nothing more to be done in this place, the doors to the buildings having been barred and suitable notices of seizure affixed, he took his leave of the company.

'You will appreciate, sir,' he explained to Campbell, 'that I have just buried my son. My presence is required at the Castle.'

He cantered off up the road to the pass. Were it not for the unhappy circumstances of the day, he might have gained enjoyment from Campbell's predicament. What a fool the man was! And what fate lay in store for him when the Marquis returned from his foreign travels and discovered how his cousin had betrayed his trust?

James Fisk watched his master until he was out of sight. Then he hurried to intercept the departing company.

Seeing Campbell left unattended in the yard, the ghillie approached with caution.

'Mr Campbell, sir. Mr Patrick Campbell?' The ghillie doffed

his bonnet and stood respectfully, his eyes upon the ground at the feet of His Lordship's representative.

'You know my name, man!' Campbell replied irritably. 'Either state your business or be gone!'

'It is about the fight at the pass, sir,' Fisk grovelled. Sycophancy was what a man like Patrick Campbell expected of his servants. He was not disappointed in the ghillie.

'Well?' barked Patrick, anxious to be on his way.

'If it please your Honour,' Fisk tugged at his forelock, 'is it truly the case that only two of the villains were arrested?'

'What of it?'

Fisk glanced around, furtively.

'I might be able to furnish the names of the others,' he lowered his voice so that Patrick was obliged to lean from his saddle to catch his words, 'for the right price!'

'As you know, Mr Whylie, I took with me several types of slate rock to test on the machines.' Dougal McGillivray had spread out upon the desk sheets of calculations, graphs and written reports from his excursion to the slate quarry of Llechwedd, at Blaenau Ffestiniog.

'All equally unsatisfactory, would you say?' William could not disguise his disappointment. He had heard of the immense progress being made in the production of roofing slates, over the border. With large orders to fill, he had hoped to be able to avail himself of the new technology.

'In every sample,' Dougal explained, 'the cutting edge became blunted after a very short time. Until a better quality of steel can be found from which to manufacture the blades, it will be unprofitable to introduce mechanical saws here. The Welsh slate is soft compared with our own. The cleavage planes are more clearly defined, and, above all, there are no pyrites crystals to blunt the blades!'

'How is it that Murdo Campbell has experienced no difficulty of this kind? For weeks now I have heard nothing but praise for the new system installed on Lunga.' William

sighed. 'Why is it possible to use mechanical saws there but not here?'

'That is it, sir,' Dougal replied, with an uncharacteristic note of sarcasm. 'You have *heard* much talk, but have you *seen* any vast piles of machine-cut slates being stacked ready for export?'

'It is a long time since I have been off the island,' William confessed. 'Do you imply that Campbell is not using the new saws to produce the bulk of his product?'

Dougal, whose visits to Lunga had been more frequent of late, had examined the slates there with the greatest care. On his trip to Wales he had had ample experience of mechanical sawing, and recognised the difference between hand-cut and machine-cut roofing slates. He knew that the bulk of material awaiting shipment from Campbell's quarries had been produced by hand.

'You think that Campbell has made a mistake in purchasing mechanical saws?' William asked.

'I am convinced of it, sir,' the young engineer replied. Then, seeing the crestfallen expression on the older man's face, he added, 'I did, however, see things in Wales that could transform our operation.'

William was eager to clutch at any straw.

'Well, man, tell me!' he demanded.

'Apart from the actual cutting, which we are agreed must continue to be done by hand,' Dougal explained, 'the Welsh decided that the most time-consuming part of the operation is transporting stone and made slates, and removing waste.'

William was unimpressed. Everyone agreed that handling the slates was the least efficient part of the operation.

'In the large quarries,' Dougal continued, 'they have introduced steam locomotives to replace ponies . . . The small engines run on the same narrow-gauge track across the quarry floors as well as above ground to various points. By using steam winches to load and unload pallets of slate, one man can handle with ease quantities which it would take scores of men to shift by hand!'

William was immediately interested. He had tremendous faith in the power of steam, and in a long career had seen one application after another introduced to make the work of the quarryman easier, and more efficient.

Having engaged William's attention, Dougal withdrew from his document case a catalogue of steam locomotives, miniatures of those increasingly familiar iron horses now belching their way across the Highlands.

'They are half the size of normal shunting locomotives,' Dougal explained, 'but very powerful, and can pull more weight than fifty horses!'

William took up the booklet, studying it intently for some time.

'This would seem to be one solution to our need to speed up production,' he declared at last. 'I will arrange a visit to the locomotive works at Stoke-on-Trent. Meanwhile, you had better survey the ground to see where we can place the new track which will be needed. The gauge is two feet, according to this.'

Dougal McGillivray glowed with satisfaction that his recommendations had been so readily accepted.

'How is your mother employing herself these days?' the manager enquired, relaxed now that a decision had been made.

'In truth, I think she is thankful not to be working,' Dougal observed. 'My young sister has become something of a handful, you know. I think Ma is having a hard time keeping up with her.'

'Miss Logie informs me that Wee Annie McGillivray is her star pupil,' declared William. 'She is already on the list for one of His Lordship's bursaries!'

'Oh, she is clever enough,' agreed Dougal, 'but her head is filled with all this talk about women's rights, and universal suffrage. To listen to her you would think that the entire gender was held in chains!'

'She is over young to be a politician!' William laughed. 'In a year or two, she will realise that boys are something more

than scruffy beasts, to be fought in the classroom. Then she will, no doubt, discover that they are just as fascinating to her as they seem to be to her elders!'

The oblique reference to Mary McCulloch was not lost on Dougal who flushed to his hair roots and made considerable play with his papers in order to cover his confusion.

Chapter 5

'These men were armed, you say?'

James Mallory looked up, speaking sharply to the police officer standing before him. The man was red-faced, nervous and ill at ease in the presence of the procurator fiscal. He held his thumbs stiffly along the seams of his dark uniform trousers, the rays of the morning sun reflected from his glistening black boots and the shiny black peak of his cap which he held rigidly beneath his left arm.

'Yes, sir!'

Mallory snorted his disapproval. These quarrymen were becoming a source of continual annoyance to him. What had once been a comfortable, untroubled district, had suddenly begun to involve him in one serious case after another. His decision to remain in his ancestral home at Tobermory, a two-hour sea crossing from Oban, had seemed perfectly satisfactory at the time of his appointment. It was now proving to be just an added aggravation, involving so much travelling to and from the county court house at Inverary.

'This rabble must be taught a lesson,' he declared. 'I hear there have been similar riots in the coalfields at Lanark, with the new trades unions behind the unrest. I intend to nip any such activity in the bud before we have a similar situation arising here!'

'Forgive me, sir,' the quiet voice of Sergeant Kinross interrupted this flow of invective, 'but I do not consider this to be a matter of trades union organisation . . . just a few friends, defending a neighbour's right to clear his worldly goods before eviction from his home.'

'But this report clearly states that the bailiff's party was

attacked by stones. Sergeant Blake himself was molested by the ringleader, and later thrown from his horse and left where he lay. Why, Kinross, he could have been seriously injured!'

'As I understand it, from speaking to the two prisoners,' Kinross protested, 'the leader of the party asked the bailiff to withhold his order for a further twenty-four hours, to allow Johnstone to evacuate the premises – a period of time consistent with normal procedure. It was only after the sergeant here insisted that the eviction party proceed immediately to carry out its duties that the stone-throwing began.'

'Sergeant Blake was obeying orders,' snapped the procurator fiscal.

'In an unnecessarily provocative manner.' Kinross knew he had gone too far when the words left his mouth. He was well aware of the methods used by this special unit of police officers engaged in assisting the bailiffs to carry out their unsavoury work. He had heard of the tidy profit to be made by the sale of goods confiscated during eviction operations.

'Do you deny that one of the prisoners was carrying a firearm?' Mallory was becoming impatient.

'No, sir,' Kinross replied, presenting the weapon for the fiscal's inspection.

The blunderbuss was an ancient piece which had last been fired by Noah's great-grandfather at Corunna. The barrel was rusty and the flintlock stuck fast from lack of use. There was no way that the gun could have been fired.

'The prisoner is a young lad,' Kinross explained, hoping Mallory would see sense in this at least. 'He carried no powder, no shot. There was clearly no intention to use the gun.'

'He could have clouted one of my officers with it,' protested Blake, 'or used it to threaten. How were my men to know that the weapon would not fire?'

'As I understand it, the boy kept the gun in his pocket all the while. It was only when he was searched at the lock-up that the weapon was discovered on his person.' Kinross could see that his colleague was determined to have his revenge, even if it meant the hanging of an innocent, if foolhardy, child.

'I have heard enough,' declared Mallory. 'You will arrest the four men mentioned in Sergeant Blake's report, Kinross. I shall make my recommendation to the sheriff that all six men be brought to trial on charges of intent to cause a riot, interference with the process of the law, and in the case of the prisoner, Noah Fraser, carrying a firearm with intent to maim or kill officers of the law.'

Kinross blanched at the last charge. If he made further protest while Mallory was in this mood, he knew that he would seal the fate of Noah Fraser once and for all. He would bide his time on that score. Surely no jury would convict the boy when the full evidence was given? On the matter of the further arrests, however, he was outspoken.

'The four names, sir . . .' he began.

'Well?' Mallory demanded, exasperated beyond measure.

'They were given by a most unreliable witness.' Kinross went on to explain how James Fisk had misled his investigation into the death of Peter Lugas. When he had finished, Mallory again snorted his disapproval.

'It seems to me that this man Fisk is familiar with most of the quarrymen from Eisdalsa. Is that not the case?'

'I believe so, sir,' Kinross admitted grudgingly.

'He claims to have seen all four of these men at the croft house, shortly after the incident at the pass?'

'That is so,' agreed the sergeant.

'Then I think we can safely assume that the ghillie is correct in his assumption that the four were involved in the attack on the bailiff's party. Arrest them, sergeant, and have them transported to Inverary for trial.'

Mary McCulloch found her post as teacher in the new school on Lunga less than exacting. Despite Murdo Campbell's assurances that she would soon have a flourishing school population, the pupils were slow to materialise.

Those children who had already begun their education at Eisdalsa chose to continue there. It was only the children of incoming workers, together with those just reaching school

age, who came to her door in those first few weeks of the new academic year.

Within the classroom, there was no problem. The Department of Education decreed that only the English language was to be used in schools throughout Scotland. The incoming families were mainly from the east coast, where Gaelic had long ceased to be used as a means of communication between working-class people. Those from across the border knew not a word of the Celtic tongue, and showed little inclination to acquire it.

Only the infants whose parents and elder siblings used Gaelic as their natural form of speech were forced to become bilingual.

To Mary McCulloch, who had been born and raised on Eisdalsa Island, it came as naturally as the tides to speak in both languages. For this reason, she saw no harm in allowing her youngest pupils to speak in the Gaelic outside in the playground. Once inside the schoolroom, English was the language used by all.

Unfortunately, passers-by were able to overhear the children at play in the school yard. They were unaware of the rules enforced within the classroom. English-speaking parents were uneasy about a school where many of the children used a foreign tongue.

Using Elizabeth's techniques, by which means she herself had been educated in her later school-days, Mary McCulloch conducted a very liberal classroom regime. She gave each child a set of tasks to perform and goals at which to aim. She encouraged the older children to help the younger ones, and with such a small number of pupils, was able to devote much time to individuals.

Believing that the door to all advancement in learning was the ability to read, she spent a great deal of her day with the youngest children, helping them to master this skill. Once a child could read, he or she was given free rein to devour the contents of whatever printed material Mary could supply.

In this respect she was very fortunate. Murdo Campbell had

been more than generous in his provision of equipment for the school, and Mary could soon boast as well stocked a library as Elizabeth McIntyre had been able to amass in the course of her twelve years at Eisdalsa!

A stranger glancing through the schoolroom door might be excused for wondering what educational activity was occurring there.

Small children drew their letters laboriously, using squeaky pencils upon wooden-framed slates. A group of six and seven year olds used piles of commonplace articles, stones, acorns, neatly cut sticks of varying sizes, in order to investigate the mysteries of addition and subtraction. Singly, or in pairs, older children sat around the room in whatever position suited them best, reading, making notes in their exercise books, using lead pencils or steel pens, and even holding orderly discussions.

There were no serried ranks of neatly pinafored and slickly combed pupils chanting mathematical tables or quoting chunks of the Good Book. There was nothing in fact which the matrons of the village associated with the process of education.

To these ladies school meant only a benign form of purgatory. When their children arrived home, as mothers will they questioned them about what they had learned. The children could not say. For them, the day had been filled with experiences which they absorbed without appreciating the significance of what they had done. After a few weeks, however, even the youngest and slowest of the pupils knew the alphabet, could give the correct change in money transactions, and could read simple texts.

It was not long before the most vociferous of the parents approached William Whylie, as Chairman of the School Board for the parish, complaining about the methods used by the new teacher.

William, who had experienced similar problems ten years before, at the Eisdalsa school, did his best to reassure these good people, but he knew that Mary was fighting an uphill battle. In his capacity as Chairman of the School Board,

William approached Campbell in the hope of gaining his understanding and co-operation.

'In view of your personal involvement in the Lunga school,' William explained, 'I felt it only right to invite you to become a member of the School Board yourself. By rights all members are elected, but there is provision for a small number of additional people who have special interests.'

Campbell, who had enough problems of his own to contend with, was not overjoyed at the invitation. Seeing the position as one which might give him more say in community affairs, however, he agreed, albeit reluctantly.

Seeking to glean whatever advantage he could from this rare encounter, William enquired how business was doing in the Lunga quarries.

'Splendidly,' declared his rival. 'You should take a leaf from my book you know, Whylie. Mechanisation is the theme for the future. Hand-worked slates will soon be a thing of the past!'

'I have had young McGillivray down at the Welsh quarries, looking into it.' William saw no reason for secrecy. 'His report suggests that Eisdalsa slate cannot be handled by mechanised saws. The cost in replacement blades far outweighs the profit from faster production.'

William watched for the other man's reaction, and was not disappointed.

Murdo Campbell was not about to concede that he had made a mistake, however.

'Oh, a few teething troubles, adjusting the blades to the harder rock, nothing more than that. We shall soon be going at full speed, never fear. Then there will be no competing with Lunga for uniformity of slates and speed of production!'

Despite his loud protestations, William was convinced that Campbell was concealing a very heavy burden of worry. If he were not so arrogant, the older man would gladly have offered what advice and support he could, but until Murdo confessed to his mistake, there was nothing anyone could do to help him.

'I am looking into ways of expediting things,' William

confided. 'In particular the transportation of slates. With ample markets in the Antipodes, I am hard pressed to keep up the necessary level of production.'

'Well, believe me, Whylie,' Murdo bragged, 'you will have to mechanise cutting soon or get out of the business!'

'Oh,' replied William calmly, 'I think that I can afford to wait a little longer.'

He collected his hat and cane and rose from his chair. Campbell's office was certainly a far more impressive place than his own. The room was large and airy. The walls, plastered and whitened, were covered in detailed maps of the island, showing present workings and future proposals. There was an orderliness and cleanliness which William admired but had never been able to achieve in his own situation. He sighed inwardly, sad that this barrier lay between them, for he was convinced that in an increasingly aggressive market place they would do better as a team than in competition with each other.

'I can confidently expect you to attend the next meeting of the School Board?' he asked, as Campbell came from behind the desk to open the door for his visitor.

'I will do my best to be present,' the younger man confirmed. 'In the meantime, I shall look in on the school myself. I can hardly pacify protesting parents if I am not fully conversant with the situation.'

The shorter days provoked a general gloom, which also descended upon the little schoolhouse. The schoolroom seemed vast, and no matter how Mary rearranged them, the eight pupils, their ages varying from four to eleven years, were lost amongst the collection of shining new desks.

Seeking some diversion for the children, on a rare sparkling morning in early December, she conducted a nature walk along the shore, away from the village and the noisy slate quarries which were eating relentlessly into the surrounding hillsides.

The oldest children carried an enlarged copy of the new Ordnance Survey map of the island. On this they hoped to

plot natural objects, woodland, plants and wildlife, as they encountered them. The younger children carried baskets in which to collect their finds. There was much scurrying to and fro, laughing and screaming too, but the overall impression was one of controlled activity.

Mary, from an elevated position near the children with the map, watched as the young ones combed the shoreline.

She was startled to be addressed in a deep, familiar tone.

'Why, Miss McCulloch, what a hive of industry it is to be sure!'

She turned to find the piercing grey eyes of Murdo Campbell gazing at her. Unnerved by his abrupt approach, she coloured and stammered her reply.

'Why, Mr Campbell, how you startled me.' In trying desperately not to appear reproachful, her response sounded coy, arch even.

'What are you doing out here?' he enquired. Although Murdo had not intended his question to suggest disapproval, she felt obliged to apologise for not being inside the schoolroom.

'On such a fine day, I felt the fresh air would do the children good,' she explained. 'They are collecting materials and information for a project which will occupy them inside when the weather breaks.'

Sensing her defensiveness, Murdo was quick to reassure her.

'I am quite certain that any activity which you arrange for the children will have an educational motive,' he declared. 'I feel that I should mention to you, however, certain doubts expressed by parents and presented to the Chairman of the School Board, concerning these rather "modern" methods of yours. There are those who would prefer to hear the chanting of tables and psalms issuing from the schoolroom! Some of the ladies feel that there should be less playing and more learning going on in your classroom. What do you say to that?' he concluded provocatively.

'But my pupils are making excellent progress!' Mary protested. 'How can anyone object to the way that the children

can read and calculate, some of them well in advance of their years!'

Murdo, unable to argue with this, shrugged.

'I fear that their interpretation of my classroom activities is a mistaken one,' Mary went on indignantly. 'Just because children enjoy what they are doing, does not mean that they are not learning. I challenge your ladies of the parish to show me a child here who is not capable of work commensurate with his or her age group. There is absolutely no reason for learning to be dull and uninteresting!'

By God, thought Campbell, she is a magnificent creature when riled! He pictured her in a less professional situation, and felt his excitement mounting.

His reply to her outburst was controlled.

'Come now, Miss McCulloch.' He spoke calmly in that deep, throbbing, well-modulated tone which had first aroused her interest. 'I am quite sure that this is all a storm in a teacup. Perhaps there is some way in which you can demonstrate to the parents what it is you are achieving with your somewhat irregular methods?'

She regarded him coolly for some minutes before answering.

'I had anticipated a combined survey of this area, compiled from information gathered by the children, each contributing as much as they are able. If this were put on display, do you suppose the parents would come to see it, and perhaps allow me to explain a little of the method used to accomplish it?'

'That sounds like an admirable solution to me,' he responded, 'but will it not mean a very great deal of extra work for you?'

'I would have made an effort to co-ordinate the children's work in any case,' she replied. 'It will simply mean taking a little more trouble with the presentation.'

'Let that be it then!' he declared. 'If you will let me know when the exhibition is ready, I will invite the parents to visit the school. Maybe we could offer them some refreshment . . . make a proper event of it?'

'Whatever you say,' she agreed, deferring to his superior knowledge of such affairs.

She glanced around, making a rapid calculation of the number of children in view. Missing two particularly adventurous spirits, she observed, 'I must attend to the children before someone has an accident.'

He laid his hand upon her arm to detain her a moment longer.

'Perhaps I may offer my services as an assistant in preparing the exhibition? You will need boards for display, furniture removed and so on.'

She could hardly refuse an offer apparently kindly meant.

'That is very good of you, Mr Campbell,' she thanked him. 'If I need help, I shall not hesitate to call upon you.'

He had to be satisfied with that for the time being, but before releasing her said quietly, 'Murdo. You promised to call me Murdo.'

'Thank you, Murdo.' She smiled, and could feel herself blushing again.

Without another word she hurried off to find the missing boys.

Margaret and Ian were making their weekly visit to their grandmother's cottage on Eisdalsa Island. Stuart should have been with them but, as usual, he was away with the fishing boats which had sailed before dawn on the high tide. This late in December, their trip would need to be a short one, around the Isles of the Sea, that string of triangular-shaped islands which stretched away from Argyll towards the wide expanse of the Atlantic.

'Next stop, Newfoundland!' Stuart would cry as he hauled on a sheet and watched the great brown sail slide smoothly into place.

Since Hugh's departure for Edinburgh, Margaret had missed the lively banter of her elder brothers. Stuart had withdrawn into himself when at home, reserving his masculine wit for his fishing friends or for the school yard. Ian, much as she

loved him, could not supply the level of conversation which fed Margaret's insatiable desire for ideas for stories.

More and more the girl attached herself to her grandmother, an inexhaustible source of tales, both factual and of the folklore variety. Margaret's writing reflected this influence, and as her expertise grew, it became apparent to Elizabeth and Annabel that she had a real talent for writing.

'Grandmama,' Margaret squatted beside the range, a huge tabby cat balanced comfortably on her knees, 'will I be able to go to school in Edinburgh?'

Morag glanced up from her pastry-making. Observing the far-away look of longing in Margaret's eyes, she was saddened but replied more brightly than she felt.

'I think not, dear. Your father would rather that you stayed at home with your mother. Even if he wanted you to go away to school, he could not afford it. The three boys will cost him a great deal of money to educate.'

Margaret took a long look at Ian who was stretched upon the rug, poring over a copy of the *Children's Newspaper*. Much as she loved him, she could not help wishing he were a girl like herself. As the elder, she would be next in line for any money there was for education. She could not understand why Ian must come first. He was such a little boy, and not as good as she at his school work.

As though reading the girl's thoughts, Morag continued, 'It is so much more important for a boy to have a good education. He will have to find suitable employment, and his earnings must be sufficient to support a wife and family. A girl of your class can expect to be married. You will never have to earn a living.'

'But I want to earn my own money,' Margaret protested. 'I shall be a great authoress some day.'

'You do not need to go away to school to write your stories,' her grandmother replied. 'Being here at home has not stopped you from writing so far!'

'Uncle Angus says that a truly professional writer must

call upon his experience of life if his work is to be acceptable to others. What experience of life will I have if I never, ever leave the village?'

'There is plenty of real-life experience going on about you every day,' Morag observed. 'Perhaps you should take a closer look at what is happening here on your own doorstep. As for going away to another school, Mrs McIntyre is just about the best teacher any girl could have!'

'But Wee Annie McGillivray is to attend the Merchants' Ladies' Hospital, and later George Watson's Ladies' School,' Margaret protested. 'She says that she will go on to University from there. If she, an orphan, can go, why can't I?'

Morag thought that the child should be having this conversation with her own parents, but was aware of the limited opportunities afforded for such talk in her son's household. With both parents so heavily involved in the work of the practice, it would be difficult for Margaret to find the opportunity to raise such an important subject for discussion.

'Wee Annie will have to earn her own living,' Morag explained, as tactfully as she could. 'She is a very clever girl. Both Miss Logie and Mrs McIntyre believe that she will take a degree and become a teacher, or perhaps even a lawyer.'

'She is no better than I at arithmetic,' Margaret objected. 'And her marks for composition are never as good as mine! How can her mother afford to send her to Edinburgh anyway?'

'She is to receive a bursary, offered by the Marquis of Stirling himself.'

'But why her and not me?' The child was almost whining now.

'Such bursaries are only for the children of working-class people,' Morag explained. 'Having no father makes Annie doubly eligible for financial assistance.'

'You mean that my papa could afford to send me if he wanted me to go, don't you, Grandmama?'

There were tears in Margaret's eyes as realisation of the true position came to her.

Morag had tried so hard to avoid this admission. If she did not entirely agree with her son, she was unwilling to display any disloyalty towards him, certainly not in front of his own children.

'Your papa knows what is best for you, dear,' she concluded weakly. 'Now then, there is just time for you both to take a quick walk before tea. Go down to the harbour and see if there is any sign of your brother. The boats should be back by now.'

In the quiet that followed their departure, Morag considered the conversation with her granddaughter. David might be opposed to girls receiving higher education, but he could not prevent his daughter from spending her own money, once she reached her majority. Margaret might have to wait a little longer than Wee Annie to achieve her objective, but reach it she would, with Morag's help!

'This affair at the Johnstone croft has got quite out of proportion,' William sighed, as he put down the latest communication from Sergeant Kinross. 'Here we are, faced with a deadline for loading the slates and four members of my most productive team missing!'

'Are the men to be charged then, sir?' Dougal, who had been mapping out the route to be taken by the new railway, looked up from his drawing board.

'It's worse than we could have imagined,' replied his employer. 'Young Noah is charged with carrying a firearm with intent to fire upon the officers. Archie Johnstone is accused of laying hands upon the sergeant in charge, and of causing him to be thrown from his horse and severely injured.'

'But,' Dougal protested, 'if proven these are serious offences. Carrying firearms with intent could mean a hanging. We shall not be seeing either Noah or Archie for a long time, if ever again!'

'As you say, "if proven",' William replied. 'Sergeant Kinross believes that this Sergeant Blake has exaggerated his own

injuries, and that his insistence upon prosecution is the result of a personal grudge.'

'Is there nothing we can do to help the men?' Dougal asked, confident that William had an answer for all problems.

'I have engaged a young solicitor in Inverary, Duncan McKay. He represented Ellen McDougal. Dr Beaton speaks very highly of him.'

'Were there no witnesses to speak up for our men?' Dougal enquired.

'Unfortunately, no,' William responded. 'It appears that Jack McDougal and Ewan Johnstone were not even at the pass, but there is nobody other than Beth Johnstone to confirm that they were at the croft, dealing with the animals. There were the bailiffs and the policemen accompanying Sergeant Blake, of course, but it seems that they saw nothing of the attack upon the sergeant, the pass being so narrow.'

'So it is the word of Sergeant Blake against the six men?' Dougal felt that the case for the prosecution was very weak.

'And of James Fisk, who claims to have seen the remaining four men at the croft, shortly after the attack at the pass. Noah and Tom Stobbart were captured during the assault.'

'Then it is impossible for the prosecution to prove that Ewan and Jack were there at all?' Dougal scoffed at the idea of a successful arraignment.

William, however, had an uneasy feeling that the affair could not be dismissed so lightly.

* * *

A week before Christmas Mary McCulloch felt that there was nothing more that the children could do to improve upon their display. During the afternoon she had the older pupils write a neat invitation to the specially invited guests, including members of the School Board, Mrs McIntyre and Miss Logie from Eisdalsa, and Mr Campbell himself.

With Murdo Campbell's invitation, Mary included a note of her own:

Dear Mr Campbell,

As you can see, the children have completed the work for their display.

I shall be arranging the schoolroom on Thursday evening, in preparation for the meeting with the parents on Friday. There are a number of display stands to be made up and some trestle tables to be erected. If you can spare the time, I would be most grateful for the assistance which you offered earlier on.

Yours truly,
Mary McCulloch

She worried over the manner in which to end the note and sign her name. She was not insensitive to Murdo's advances, disguised though they had been under a veneer of authority.

The school was in his patronage; he was her employer. He had every right to discuss the progress of the pupils with her, and make suggestions about how best to win over the doubting parents.

She knew in her heart, however, that his interest in her was more than professional, and she was not quite sure of her own reaction to that knowledge.

Was she playing with fire to invite him to join her this evening? She knew that Dougal would be displeased to learn of the invitation. Well, Dougal McGillivray was not her keeper. He had made no offer to help her when she had explained her plans to him last Sunday. Not that she had indicated that she would need any assistance, of course.

She took the official invitation, so laboriously copied out by Michael McIver, one of the older pupils, and folded her own note inside the paper.

'Now, Michael,' she instructed, 'you are to see that this letter is placed directly into Mr Murdo Campbell's own hands. None other. Do you understand?'

'Yes, miss.' The child took the paper and pushed it into his jacket pocket. Knowing the variety of objects which generally emerged from that same place, Mary shuddered a little as she imagined the probable condition of the note on delivery. Campbell had once been a boy too, she told herself, he would be understanding!

The room had grown cold. Mary always allowed the fire to die down during the afternoon class, not wishing to exceed the meagre allowance of fuel allocated to the schoolroom. By seven in the evening, the air was quite chilly. She was thankful that she had plenty of strenuous exercise ahead to warm her.

A stand to which had been attached a large board some six feet by four had been set up at the end of the room for the children to pin up their various charts and pictures. Now this, which was the focus of her exhibition, must be placed before the teacher's dais. She began to pull on one leg of the stand. It refused to budge. She pulled again. The heavy screen moved an inch or so, and stuck fast on the edge of a floorboard.

Patiently, she went to the far end, lifted the foot which had become jammed and freed it. Back then to the leading edge of the board. Again she tugged.

Suddenly the whole thing moved as though cushioned upon air. She realised that she was no longer alone. Glancing around the screen she found herself staring into the laughing eyes of Murdo Campbell.

'Why so surprised, Miss Mary?' he chided. 'You called for my assistance, and here I am!'

'You are most welcome, sir,' she greeted him, trying desperately to disguise the excitement his presence invoked. 'I do not think I could have moved it without your help.'

'Not at all, not at all,' he said dismissively. Looking around, he spotted a heap of folded trestles. 'Are these to be erected as well?' he asked. Straining to recover her composure after the previous exertions, she could only nod in agreement.

'Show me where, dear lady. I will attend to them.'

For some minutes they busied themselves with the tables.

Soon the furniture was in place, and Mary stood back to consider the effect.

Satisfied, she went to a corner where a number of wooden crates held all manner of objects, collected and carefully annotated by the children. She made to lift one of these, only to have it snatched from her grasp.

'You lay things out,' Murdo ordered. 'I handle the heavy objects.'

It was an hour or more before Mary was completely satisfied.

Even Murdo, to whom the exercise was merely a means to an end, was forced to admit that the work was impressive. Those recalcitrant parents would certainly be won over by such a display of effort on the part of their offspring. He had no hesitation about expressing his admiration as he mopped his brow, and came to sit beside her on the edge of the dais.

'Such fortunate pupils,' he commented, 'to have such a beautiful teacher. Mine was an old crab called Mistress Ballantyne as I remember. She had a strong right arm, and wielded the taws with great accuracy!'

At her shocked expression, his laughter changed to something else. His mouth softened as he looked into her limpid brown eyes. His smile became inviting, coaxing. He slipped an arm deftly about her shoulders, placing his hand behind her head. Gentle pressure forced her mouth towards his own. His tongue pried open her unresisting lips, passed between the even row of pearl white teeth and found its mark.

Mary shuddered. A wave of heat passed through her entire body. Her bosom suddenly felt taut within her bodice and she was embarrassed to realise that there was a dampness between her legs.

Gentle hands, searching and prying, were finding their way through a barrier of school-marmly garments. In seconds he had her breast exposed and was sucking at it and fondling it by turns.

Mary felt her control oozing away from her. She knew she must resist, but did she want to?

He had her bent back now, his free hand searching for her beneath a tumbled mass of white cambric edged with lace.

At last, the Minister's daughter in her took command. She caught at and held away the prying hands. Hauling herself back to a sitting position, she thrust him from her and sprang to her feet.

Expertly, she restored the bodice to its accustomed modesty and straightened her skirts.

Flushed and exasperated, Murdo Campbell sat unbelieving, his legs dangling over the edge of the dais, and watched her dress her hair, drawing her fair locks into a severe bun.

It was at this moment that the door flew open to reveal Dougal McGillivray, without a hat, his hair streaming, overcoat soaking wet from sea spray.

He did not see Murdo immediately.

'Sorry I am so late, Mary,' he greeted her. 'I had intended to come earlier, realising that there would be some heavy lifting.'

He looked around the room with an appreciative eye.

'Well,' he exclaimed admiringly, 'this is some exhibition.'

At last his gaze lighted upon Murdo. He looked quickly from one to the other, and sensed for the first time that he was an intruder upon a drama only half completed.

Mary, patting her hair demurely, explained, 'Mr Campbell was kind enough to offer his services. I fear that you are just too late to be of any assistance. I'm sorry you have had a wasted journey, Dougal, on such an unpleasant night.'

Following her lead, Campbell rose to his feet, brushed down his trousers, which were covered with dust from the wooden dais, and made great play of removing a splinter which he had acquired during the tussle with Mary.

'Oh,' she cried, moving towards him for the first time since Dougal's appearance. 'Let me see, is it very deep?'

She made a grab at the offending finger and peered carefully at the end of a very small splinter.

'I think I could get that out with a sewing needle,' she declared.

Murdo, squeamish at the best of times, and not trusting Mary to operate with a steady hand under the circumstances, thrust the wounded appendage firmly into his pocket.

'It's nothing,' he protested. 'I shall soak it out when I get home.' He took out his watch.

'It is getting very late,' he observed. 'My housekeeper will be wondering why I have not returned for my supper.' Then, to Dougal, 'We must be taking the same direction, McGillivray. Will you accompany me along the road?'

Dougal looked helplessly at Mary. This was not what he had planned at all. If only he had managed to get away from the office a little earlier, he would not have missed the tide and had to wait until his boat was afloat again in the harbour.

The rules of decorum forbade him to spend time with Mary in her own house at this late hour. He could hardly refuse Campbell's proposition, much as he disliked the man.

They waited while Mary turned out all the lamps and locked the schoolroom door. Then both men accompanied her to her house and saw her safe inside before turning away and striding off down the road towards the pier.

No words were exchanged for quite a few minutes. Eventually Murdo cleared his throat noisily before remarking, 'Miss McCulloch has done a fine job with the children. I hope that the Board, and indeed the parents, will appreciate the hard work that has gone into the exhibition.' In the darkness, he was able to allow himself a smile of satisfaction. Some of the work had been more pleasurable than hard!

Dougal uttered something noncommittal. His mind was in a turmoil of indecision. What had been going on in the schoolroom before he arrived? Knowing Murdo Campbell's reputation, it could have been, well . . . anything! Mary was such an innocent. She should not be left on her own with the threat of other such compromising encounters. The sooner he sealed their betrothal with a ring, the better. He would have a talk with his mother about it tonight!

Chapter 6

Snow had fallen on the highest peaks in early December, and the chill north-easterlies which persisted for days on end ensured that it remained, a stark reminder that the worst of the winter weather was yet to come.

At sea level, and on Eisdalsa in particular, snow did not lie for long. The warm waters of the Gulf Stream kept temperatures above freezing, and if it were not for the harsh, salt-laden winds, the island would have been a paradise for plant and bird life.

As it was, quarrymen and crofters alike were obliged to grow their few vegetables behind high walls, which gave some protection from the hurricane-force winds. Even in more prosperous times, food was short in the winter months.

In poor households, a boll of meal per family, issued by the parish council, was augmented by shell fish, edible seaweed, salt herring, and fruits of the field, bottled and stored against the time of shortage.

As Christmas approached, from out of their secret store cupboards the housewives brought forth their hoarded treasure. Runner beans which had been salted down in old stone jars; eggs which were pickled in isinglass; apple slices dried over the range; cheeses that had been left to ripen on top shelves, out of reach of prying fingers.

For those who had no surplus to put into store, the prospects were grim indeed, but no family was allowed to go without on Christmas Day.

Michael McFarlane, who managed the Company Store on William's behalf, allowed the wives of quarrymen in work to run up a debt, until such time as their husbands were paid for

the slates they had produced. Their names, and the amounts they owed, were marked up on the slate which hung behind the counter of the village shop. Those whose husbands were not in steady work, however, were given no such accommodation. Cash on the nail was the order of the day for such as Martha McDougal and Beth Johnstone.

Anne McGillivray met the two ladies in McFarlane's store, deliberating over their meagre purchases. It was Christmas Eve.

'It will be a sad festival for us,' mused Martha McDougal. 'Pa has scarce spoke a word since they took our Jack.'

'No news yet of the trial?' Anne asked.

'They say it will take time to sort all the evidence . . . not until February at the earliest, Sergeant Kinross told Mr Whylie!'

'A long time for innocent men to be in gaol,' Beth murmured. She had never ceased to protest that her husband had not left the croft house on that fatal day.

'Mrs McIntyre tells me that the children are bearing up well, despite their father's absence,' observed Anne. 'Your Donnie has taken quite a liking to my Wee Annie, it seems.' Donnie had been encouraged to visit the McGillivray household, with his little sister, on the pretext that Wee Annie would help him with his reading. In fact, Anne took it as an opportunity to feed the weans, without offending their proud but impoverished relatives.

'What we would have done without the help of Ewan's kinfolk, I do not know,' declared Beth. 'At least we have a roof over our heads and a fire to sit by.'

Anne marvelled, not for the first time, at the ability of her neighbours to make a life for themselves in cramped accommodation, with little to eat and only their own talents for entertainment. She had spent many a cheerful evening in the little house which now held not only Ewan's cousin Fergus, his wife and three children, but also Beth, Donnie and Molly. Fergus had the great gift of music, and could entertain the company all night with his fiddle playing. His wife Catherine

sang in the clear, sweet tones of the Hebrides, old Gaelic songs that were a part of the Highland heritage. The couple were welcomed at every ceilidh; no party was complete without them.

'You will all be coming to the Hogmanay party in the Drill Hall?' Anne urged, knowing that both families might feel unable to show themselves in public at such an event.

'Fergus will be there for sure,' said Beth. 'But I havena the heart for such frolicking myself.'

'There will be no will to celebrate in our house, either,' declared Martha. 'I had thought to bring young Ian home for the holiday, but as things are, he will have a better time in the servants' hall at Ballachuan House, I'm thinking.'

'Will you not see your boy at all, then?' asked Anne. 'He will miss his mother at the festive season.'

'No more than I shall miss him,' replied Martha, quite downcast.

'Would you go to Ballachuan, to him, were you able to leave your mother?' Anne asked her.

'Would I not!' exclaimed Martha. 'But since Jack was taken, my father can scarce look after his own needs. He would not know how to deal with Ma.'

'What if I were to take over for you at the croft tomorrow?' Anne suggested. 'Dougal will go to church with Mary McCulloch, and is to have dinner at the Manse. Wee Annie and I will be alone. If I came to cook dinner for your parents, would you go to see Ian then?'

Martha seemed overwhelmed by Anne's generosity.

'Would you? Would you really?' she cried.

'I would be happy to do so,' Anne confirmed. 'It will be good for Wee Annie to have company on Christmas Day.'

Not much company for a young lassie, Martha considered, but thrust the thought aside in anticipation of her own good fortune.

Among the many traditions surrounding the end of one year and the beginning of the next, was the Factor's Dinner held at Creag Castle every Christmas Eve. No-one could remember

how the first of these occasions had come about; possibly it had been at the behest of some previous Marquis, anxious to show his appreciation of some outstanding contribution to the welfare of the parish by those with responsibility for it.

Whatever its origins, the occasion was always anticipated with pleasure by the middle-ranking portion of the population. This year, however, there was some doubt as to whether the dinner would be held, for Alicia Lugas, still mourning the death of her son, had shown little interest in social affairs for many months. She had hardly appeared about the parish at all during the past summer. Heavily veiled, and dressed in unrelieved black, she would drive out periodically to visit the tiny kirkyard on the hill. When autumn came, she began once more to attend evening services on a Sunday, but even then her responses to well-wishing members of the congregation were brief and invited no friendly exchange.

Indeed, had Alicia been allowed to go her own way, there would have been no festive dinner party that year. But Alexander Lugas, who had condoned his wife's mourning thus far, determined that life should return to normal, now that a decent period had elapsed.

'Alicia, my dear,' he announced at luncheon one day in mid-December, 'it is time for you to be drawing up your list of invitations to the Christmas Eve Dinner.'

She stared at him blankly, not fully comprehending the meaning of what he was saying.

'But, Alexander, how . . . ?' She tailed off, her powers of concentration, for so long unexercised, were unable to sustain her protest to the end of the sentence.

'Do not think me unfeeling, my love,' he said, not unkindly, 'but the affairs of the estate must continue to be at the forefront of my considerations, and I am conscious of our neglect of duty towards His Lordship and the people, in respect of maintaining good relationships. A simple affair is all that is required, with people whom we both know well and to

whom no explanations will be necessary for any laxity on our part.'

Alicia Lugas was born of that class who understand the need to take responsibility for the welfare of others. From her earliest years, she had been trained to nurture those fellow beings less fortunate than herself. It had been no hard task for her to assume the mantle of 'Lady of the Manor', when Alexander, a kinsman of the then Marquis, had been appointed to take charge of this valued area of his estates. She did not need to be convinced that he was right. She had allowed her grief to cloud her judgement for too long.

When she at last raised her head to respond, she was startled to see how anxiously her husband awaited her reply.

'I have no heart for celebrations,' she told him, 'but if you insist, I shall do my best to see your guests entertained fittingly.'

'That is all I ask, Alicia.' He rose from his place at table and came to her. He was not a demonstrative man at any time, she had long ago ceased to expect outward displays of affection, but as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, she felt that some barrier between them had been broken down. As she listened to his steps receding along the passage, she caught sight of her own reflection in the gleaming copper samovar and discovered the hint of a smile upon her lips.

Alicia went to the charming little sitting-room which was her special sanctum and sat down before her elegantly simple writing desk. She pulled out a sheet of paper from the top drawer, and began to list the names of those who must be invited.

Some were easy to decide upon: Doctor and Mrs Beaton; Mr Whylie, the quarry manager; her brother-in law the Reverend McCulloch . . . her pen hovered in mid air as she recalled the face of her dear dead sister, Myra . . . and her niece Mary. She must also invite Sir Henry Munro from Ballachuan House, and Lady Munro . . . Lady Munro should

be seated next to Alexander, she would expect such a courtesy being the highest ranking lady present . . . Alicia made a note. Alexander's new lawyer must not be forgotten. She added the name of Mr McKay from Inverary. Lastly, she felt obliged to invite Patrick Campbell, that obnoxious cousin of His Lordship's whom Alexander so detested. Both of these men would bring their wives of course, but what of Murdo Campbell, from Lunga. She had heard rumours that he had a house party staying for the festive season. Perhaps she should make his invitation an open one, Mr Campbell and guest?

She made a note beside the name, and counted the people on her list. One lady short . . . of course, Elizabeth McIntyre would even up the numbers!

Alexander Lugas surveyed the company with satisfaction. It had been a long time since such a jolly gathering had been assembled in the Castle.

He was glad to see that Alicia had invited young McGillivray, as he had suggested. After all, he was something of a protégé of His Lordship's and his achievement in gaining his degree should be recognised. He might well become manager in Whylie's place one day. Alexander had not yet met the young schoolmistress from Eisdalsa, Katherine Logie, but he knew her father well. He must remember to ask after him during the evening.

The choice of food and wine had been as excellent as only Alicia could make it. Her table placings too had been a success. There was a comfortable murmur of conversation throughout the meal, and no awkward silences. No host could hope for more.

Casting his glance to the far end of the long table, he raised his glass in silent salute to his wife. Alicia rewarded him with a warm smile, and a nodded acknowledgement of the compliment.

'Do you believe that you will remain at Eisdalsa for long, Mr McGillivray?' she enquired of Dougal, whom she had

seated on her left. 'I understand that the slate industry is not faring well in these hard times.'

'I shall stay as long as my services are required, ma'am,' he answered. 'I feel that I owe an obligation to His Lordship to remain so long as there is slate to be cut.'

'Well spoken, young man.' The Reverend McCulloch nodded in agreement. 'How refreshing it is to find a young person with a sense of responsibility towards his elders.'

'There are great opportunities for engineers such as myself in the Colonies,' Dougal continued, 'but emigration would depend upon a number of factors.'

'Oh, of course.' Alicia was remembering something of this young man's family. 'Your mother is a widow, is she not, and you have a younger sister?'

'Yes indeed, ma'am, a young woman requiring a masculine hand to keep her in order, I fear!'

The Minister was quick to come to Wee Annie McGillivray's defence.

'The child is exceptionally gifted, Mrs Lugas,' he assured his hostess. 'The School Board has seen fit to recommend to His Lordship that she be sent to one of the best schools in Edinburgh, The Merchants' Ladies' Hospital.'

'Was that the name of my old school I heard mentioned, Mrs Lugas?' Murdo Campbell's partner had been introduced to the company as Miss Julia Durrell. Despite being an outsider in this gathering of local dignitaries, she had no hesitation in making herself heard.

Annabel, who had suffered the strident tones of Miss Durrell's voice throughout the meal, could not resist a small gibe in retaliation.

'Really, Miss Durrell?' she queried. 'I understood that the school was a charitable establishment intended for the daughters of the poor merchants of Edinburgh. It is because of His Lordship's beneficent interest in the establishment that a small number of places are reserved for his nominees.'

'Oh, I believe it was intended for orphan girls originally,' Julia retorted coldly. 'That is why it is so quaintly called a

hospital! Things have changed considerably since the school was first set up. Today places are sought for their daughters by the highest in the land!'

'I believe that it is not impossible for a pupil to go on to George Watson's school, in order to prepare for University entrance?' Elizabeth joined in from the far end of the table.

Miss Durrell dismissed this suggestion with a little laugh. 'The school's main aim is to provide young ladies with those attributes which will allow them to conduct themselves properly in society. Studies of an academic nature are only followed by those needing to find a living for themselves. The charity pupils, in fact.'

'I cannot for the life of me understand why any young woman should aspire to a University education,' observed Sir Henry. Sweating profusely, he finished his second helping of fruit fool and chased it down with a liberal draught of Marsala wine. The tenant of Ballachuan estate continued, 'Seems to me that fillin' a gel's head with all that stuff puts her in danger of producing short-sighted young uns with bulgin' brows!'

Miss Durrell tittered at this remark, confirming Mary's initial estimate of the woman's limited intelligence. The comment, born of a partly digested resumé of Mr Darwin's notorious book, was of a kind popular in the light-natured periodicals of the day, such as were intended for the drawing-rooms of middle-class matrons and their empty-headed daughters.

Annabel and Elizabeth exchanged amused glances when Mary McCulloch took up the challenge.

'If women are to play their full part in society, Sir Henry, they must acquire an education of the highest standard. How else will they be in a position to compete with their male counterparts?'

'Why is it assumed that women are intended to compete with men at every level?' questioned David Beaton. 'It is unlikely that any female can absorb the depth of information required by a judge or an engineer, for example, and the

illogicality of the female mind precludes her from being able to apply that knowledge, even though she may acquire it.'

William smiled sympathetically at Annabel, knowing how much this attitude of David's disturbed her.

'I would challenge you for scientific evidence on that score,' he interjected. 'I believe that women do have a role in society, outside the home. I foresee a time when there will be women physicians, women lawyers, even women priests.'

There was a gasp of surprise from Lady Munro, who until now had allowed the conversation to pass over her head unheeded.

'I do not think I would care to be treated by a woman physician,' she mused, thinking no doubt that one of the highlights of a somewhat uneventful existence was the occasional visit from the handsome Dr Beaton.

'Just so long as they don't expect to become Members of Parliament,' muttered Sir Henry. 'The notion of women in politics does not bear thinking of!'

Alicia, feeling that matters were getting a little out of hand, addressed her next remark directly to her immediate companion, and the remainder of the company, taking her lead, returned to their individual conversations.

'An ambitious young man like yourself, Mr McGillivray, will no doubt be seeking a wife,' she suggested. 'Tell me, is there a future Mrs McGillivray upon the scene as yet?'

Startled at the direct nature of his hostess's question, Dougal nearly choked upon his wine. He set his glass down deliberately and glanced towards the far end of the table where Mary McCulloch appeared deep in conversation with Murdo Campbell.

Alicia, following his glance was left in no doubt as to Dougal's aspirations in the marriage stakes. Her niece, Mary McCulloch, was a pretty girl and clever too. According to reports from the parents on the island of Lunga, she was making an excellent job of teaching in the new school. She and Dougal would make an excellent match.

'Not as yet, Mrs Lugas,' he replied evasively, as he watched Mary's reaction to what Murdo was saying to her. He was dismayed to see her blush. The fellow had better mind his manners!

He felt his own face become hot, blamed the wine he had been drinking, and refused another glass when the servant approached him.

Alicia recognised jealousy when she saw it, and smiled to herself. Nothing like a little competition to put a suitor on his mettle, she thought.

Had Dougal been able to overhear the conversation at the far end of the table he would have realised that his fears were groundless.

It had begun when Alexander, seeking to involve Murdo Campbell in the general conversation, had addressed him directly.

'I gather that there are many innovations taking place in the quarries on Lunga, Mr Campbell,' he commented. 'How do you find the new cutting equipment that I have heard so much about?'

'Excellent, excellent.' Murdo prevented any possible comment on the unsatisfactory nature of his new equipment by his next remark. 'Would that the men were as efficient as the machines!'

'Trouble brewing?' Sir Henry was quick to intervene.

'Let us say there are a few idle creatures who would interfere with progress if they were given the chance,' replied Murdo. 'They will learn better. Once my machines are running at full capacity, it will soon be evident that even quarrymen can become surplus to requirements. In a few weeks, I shall have those selfsame trouble-makers begging for work.' He gave a satisfied grin.

'My business associates inform me that there is much unrest in Lanarkshire,' Patrick Campbell volunteered. 'The trades unions are becoming too active for my liking.'

'We shall have no such problems here,' Murdo declared. 'My men will get no pay until every last slate is stowed

aboard ship. Any slacking of effort, or any arguments about the conditions of their employment, and they will get nothing. If they try to bring any pressures to bear on me, they will not be paid, even for the work they have already done! It is as simple as that.'

'You speak as though these were creatures from some other planet.' Mary could not believe that this was the man who had provided the school in which she worked, and whose philanthropy had bought him a position of trust within the community. She might be his employee but she was not prepared to accept his contemptuous appraisal of the honest men amongst whom she had lived all her life.

Anger had been building in Mary McCulloch all evening. When Murdo had arrived with Miss Julia Durrell upon his arm, her aunt Alicia had led the couple from group to group as though they were visiting royalty. Whatever vague notions Mary might have harboured concerning her own relationship with Murdo Campbell were dispelled completely by Alicia's announcement that Mr Campbell had brought his fiancée along, in order to meet her prospective neighbours.

How dare the monster dally with her affections, she thought, when he was already planning his marriage to this Miss Durrell! Had not Aunt Alicia suggested that the couple had met in Glasgow, long before Murdo Campbell had settled in the parish? Her immediate dismay was tempered with disbelief as the evening wore on, giving Miss Durrell the opportunity to display all those characteristics least attractive in a young woman. What could Murdo possibly find to love in such a shallow creature?

The answer, of course, lay in the pearls at her throat and the diamonds upon her fingers, the quality of her French gown, and the sable cloak which hung beside Mary's own three-year-old tweed one in the hall below.

'Murdo Campbell,' she upbraided him, her voice throbbing with passion. 'You were once a worker in the quarries. You know what it is to labour in the rain and the wind, up to your knees in water. You have seen your kinfolk, old before

their time, screwed up with rheumatism and coughing out their lungs with bronchitis. How dare you speak so lightly of the honest toil of good, hard-working men, who daily risk their lives so that you and your city friends can make a fat profit!'

Murdo stared at her in astonishment, turning at first white with rage and then red with embarrassment. He was not used to being silenced by anyone, least of all a woman.

Alexander, who could not help but overhear this exchange, hastily curbed any further comment upon the subject by turning his attention to William Whylie.

'I was sorry to hear, Whylie, that it was some of your men involved in that business of the eviction,' he said. 'It occurs to me that the whole thing was bungled from beginning to end. That sergeant of police undoubtedly exaggerated the extent of the crime.'

'I am convinced that there was no intent to do other than extend the time for Johnstone to clear his land and remove his property from the house,' William confirmed. 'Had those in charge given adequate notice, there would have been no conflict at all!'

William was, of course, unaware of the involvement of Patrick Campbell in the matter, and Lugas did not choose to enlighten him. He did, nevertheless, gain a certain satisfaction from the pained expression upon his kinsman's face when he turned his attention to His Lordship's cousin.

'Now that the land is cleared, sir,' he taunted, 'when shall we expect to see some building activity? We are all agog hereabouts to know who is to make his home amongst us.'

Sir Henry Munro, catching a snatch of their conversation, ventured his own opinion.

'I was given to understand that it is a person of very considerable substance. Someone who has made his fortune in the South African diamond mines.' What Sir Henry Munro did not disclose was the tidy sum of money which he had received in exchange for releasing the land which, by rights, formed a part of his own tenancy.

He glanced quickly at Patrick Campbell who, by a slight inclination of the head, indicated that they had both said enough.

Alexander looked for a signal from his wife and, receiving it, rose to his feet.

'Ladies and gentlemen, my good friends,' he began, 'you will understand when I tell you that my dear wife and I,' the couple exchanged smiles, 'were in some doubt as to the propriety of holding this event, considering the short time since those terrible occurrences which have laid our family low. In the end, it was Alicia's insistence upon keeping everything as usual which won through. I hope you will agree that she has excelled herself on this occasion.' There was general appreciation of the hostess's contribution before the Factor continued: 'I would like to thank you all for joining us this evening, and making this first Christmas without our son one to be remembered for its warmth and good fellowship.' He raised his glass to the company. 'A merry Christmas to you all, and a prosperous New Year in 1892!'

On Christmas morning, Anne McGillivray went to the croft house at the northern end of the island, and prepared dinner for the McDougals.

Martha had set out very early in the day, to walk across the hills to Ballachuan. John McDougal, having been up before dawn to attend to the stock, did not return to the house until nearly noon.

He was greeted by the delicious scent of roasting chicken as he entered the farmhouse kitchen and was astonished at the change which had been wrought in the room in the few hours he had been outside. The fire, stacked high, gave a cheerful glow to the whole house, and the warmth, mingling with the rich smells of baking, made him realise how hungry he was.

But it was the presence of Anne McGillivray and her raven-haired daughter which lent a general air of purpose and excitement to the atmosphere. Even Katrina had stopped her rocking. Although she said nothing, she observed the two

visitors as they worked. Every move Wee Annie made was monitored by those expressionless eyes.

The child had found evergreen branches with which to deck the walls, ivy and gorse whose scattering of yellow blooms defied the season. The dried heads of wild flowers had been carefully arranged in a beautiful porcelain vase which was one of the few treasures passed down to Katrina by her own mother.

Wee Annie was seated beside the fire, scraping carrots, when John came in from the yard. Memories of that other child flooded back, and his eyes filled with tears. Anne, sensing his emotion, went to him and took his hands gently. She smiled at him reassuringly and gave him the customary greeting.

'A Happy Christmas to you, John McDougal.'

He acknowledged her presence with a greeting more cheerful than any he had been able to muster since the day they had taken Jack away.

'The meal is nearly ready for the table, John,' she announced. 'Go wash yourself in the yard, and by the time you are finished I shall be ready to serve.'

John looked across to where his wife rocked in her chair. 'Has Katrina acknowledged you at all?' he asked.

'She has said nothing,' Anne replied, 'and yet I have the strangest feeling that she recognises me. Our activities seem to have calmed her.'

'She must remember you,' the farmer confirmed. 'You were friends in the days before . . .'

'I should have come sooner.' Anne regretted the weeks she had allowed to pass since Ellen's trial and Jack's arrest. She had been busy with work and her own personal problems, but that was no excuse for neglecting Katrina.

'Let me see if I can persuade her to come to the table,' Anne suggested, and waited until McDougal went out into the yard before addressing the crofter's wife.

'It is Christmas Day, Katrina,' she said kindly. 'Will you not take your meal with us?'

Katrina stopped her rocking and took a long, searching look at Anne. Her neighbour's presence seemed to strike some chord with her. She made no move to rise, however.

Wee Annie, with the intuitive wisdom of the very young, knelt beside her and took hold of the hand which lay limply upon the woman's skirt. Stroking the fingers gently, the girl murmured in a voice so low that only she and Katrina knew what was said. To Anne's surprise, the woman rose to her feet and, with Wee Annie supporting her, shuffled to her place.

John, returning from his cold sluice, rubbing his scalp vigorously with a towel, was astonished to find his wife waiting for the meal to begin. It was the first time that she had sat at table since Ellen had left them.

Anne had done wonders with a tough old bird no longer fit for egg-laying. Green vegetables, grown in her own plot, augmented those provided by the croft.

On his return from the Welsh quarries, Dougal had brought her a case of Hereford apples, and one of oranges. She had wrapped the fruit carefully, and stored it away for the festivities. Such a bowl of fresh fruit was a rare sight on any table in the Hebrides. The glowing colours now brought an extra cheerfulness to the scene.

Wee Annie kept up an incessant prattle as the meal proceeded. At one moment Anne sought to quiet her, but John, starved of such entertainment, would have none of it.

'Let the child talk,' he demanded. 'It is a rare treat to hear her.'

Wee Annie told them of the preparations for the Hogmanay Party, to be held in the Drill Hall. She described the festoons of paper flowers and Chinese lanterns which had been made in school. She related tales of schoolroom adventures and talked of her own ambitions to go away to school and college and to become an advocate.

'Is such a thing possible for a woman?' John was surprised, not critical, but his question was sufficient to send Wee Annie off on a tirade about the equal ability of women to practise law alongside the menfolk.

'There are particular matters of law in which a woman might have more success than a man,' she told him. 'Your Ellen might have fared better at the hands of a female judge!'

The words were out before Anne could stop her. She should have seen it coming, and steered the conversation to another topic.

'Indeed she would, the poor child!'

Anne, Wee Annie and John McDougal turned in astonishment to Katrina, whose words were the first she had uttered for many weeks.

Wee Annie, seeing that she had managed to break down the barrier, was not prepared to let it go at that. Addressing Katrina directly, she said, 'No woman would have imprisoned your daughter, Mrs McDougal. She was so obviously not responsible for her actions.'

'Enough,' Anne interjected. 'This is no place for your political lectures, Wee Annie. Now, if we are all finished, I will clear away. Perhaps you, John, will give us a reading from the Good Book, while Annie and I do the dishes.'

Katrina said nothing more, but her face had lost the vacant look which so distressed her husband. Once, towards evening, she asked what was keeping Jack. There was a sudden hush, then John gently reassured her.

'He has had to go away for a little while, Katrina. He will be back before long.'

And so the day passed. By the light of the single oil lamp, their faces ruddy in the glow from the peat fire, they listened as John McDougal recalled old tales told to him by his grandfather. Wee Annie, who had never known her own father, revelled in his deep masculine tones. Anne McGillivray recalled similar nights, long ago, when her Jamie had held in thrall a young Dougal and an even younger Kirsty. She wept, inwardly, for Wee Annie who had until now been deprived of such nights as this.

Katrina McDougal did not speak again until Anne and her daughter prepared to depart.

John rose also, declaring that they could not walk home unescorted at such a late hour.

He turned to Katrina.

'I will be gone only a short while, my dear,' he said. 'Just sit there until I return.'

Anne bent to kiss her friend goodbye and was pleased that Katrina squeezed her hand and smiled in response.

When Wee Annie came forward to say farewell, Katrina opened her arms to the little girl and hugged her close. 'Come again soon,' she pleaded.

Wee Annie kissed her on the cheek and whispered something which the others did not catch. Katrina nodded in response. As she reached the door, Wee Annie turned once more and blew a kiss.

When Anne and her daughter were back in their own house, and John had returned to help his wife to her bed, Anne demanded of Wee Annie what had passed between her and Katrina.

'I made Mrs McDougal a promise,' Wee Annie told her.

'What was it?' Anne was mystified, and not a little perturbed that her daughter had committed herself thus.

'I told her that when I am at school in Edinburgh, I shall go to visit Ellen.'

At the Manse, the festival was celebrated quietly.

For Mary's father the day had begun early, the duties of his calling making demands upon him until well past noon. Following morning service at the church, Dougal McGillivray accompanied Mary to Tigh na Broch so that she could exchange seasonal greetings with her mother's cousin, Annabel Beaton.

The doctor's household rang with the excited chatter and laughter of a young family, a mood in which neither Mary nor Dougal felt inclined to share. Too many memories of Christmases past crowded their thoughts. At the first opportunity they made their excuses and prepared to depart.

Annabel, fully understanding how much Mary missed her mother at such a time, was anxious to detain them.

'Will you not join us for Christmas dinner?' she suggested. 'Hugh could easily cycle to intercept the minister, and bring him back here to join us.'

'It is very kind of you to suggest it, cousin Annabel,' Mary replied, 'but I think father will prefer to sit quietly by the fire after his meal, we are none of us fit company for your merry brood.'

Carrying messages of goodwill from Annabel to Dougal's mother, and from Margaret Beaton for her friend, Annie, Dougal returned with Mary McCulloch to the Manse.

In the afternoon, while the minister slept off his luncheon before the fire, the two young people strolled along the shore, across the raised beach which fringed the southern shores of the bay, and found a sheltered spot amongst the rocks where they could sit a while and watch the waves.

The light was of a peculiar clarity which made everything, sea, cliffs, the very slate rocks themselves, sparkle in a multitude of surprising colours. The December sun beat down upon the face of the rocks, warming them so that Dougal was obliged to take off his thick woollen guernsey. He spread it on the ground for Mary to sit down.

'What I found the hardest to bear . . .' she was endeavouring to explain her behaviour of the night before, '. . . was Mr Campbell's apparent contempt for his own workers.'

'There has been a deal of discontent amongst his men lately,' Dougal confirmed. 'It seems he is not only slow to pay wages, but mean into the bargain. Deductions are made for wasted slates and lost tools, when everyone knows that sometimes these things are inevitable. If faulty machinery stops production and the men cannot make slates, no compensation is paid. It is hardly surprising that there is so much unrest.'

'I do hope that the men will resolve their differences,' said Mary urgently. 'For Murdo was most insistent that he would make them pay dearly for any action against his company's interests.'

'There is little to be gained from trying to force men to work against their inclinations,' Dougal observed. 'They will

never give their best effort if they do not see a proper reward for their industry.'

'My eyes were certainly opened to Mr Campbell's true character last night,' ventured Mary, surprised to see how Dougal stiffened at her words. 'I think that he and that very unpleasant fiancée of his fully deserve one another!'

'You don't know how glad I am to hear you say so,' Dougal responded, his taut features beginning to relax into the ghost of a smile. 'There was a moment recently when I thought that I might lose you. Campbell was paying you attentions, and I knew that I could not compete with him on equal terms.'

'Oh, Dougal.' Mary took his hands in her own, and gazed searchingly into his eyes. 'Never cry yourself short. You are worth ten of Murdo Campbell. How little you know me if you think that I can be blinded by his flattery, or by his promise of rich living.'

'I just wish that I had more to offer you,' sighed Dougal. 'Perhaps I too should go abroad and seek my fortune. What would you say to that, Mary?'

'I would say that you have a mother and a sister depending upon your presence here,' she protested. 'I would suggest that you owe it to Mr Whylie to remain while he has need of your services. More than both of these,' her tone softened, 'I could not abide to see you sailing away to foreign parts . . . without me!'

He looked up sharply, hardly able to believe what he had heard.

'Do you mean that, Mary? Would you really miss me if I went away?'

The thought of Eisdalsa without Dougal's presence appalled her. Tears sprang to her eyes and coursed slowly down her cheeks.

He caught her up in his arms and held her tightly to his chest. The warmth of his body beneath the thin stuff of his shirt thrilled her. She lifted her face to be kissed.

The cloying scent of late-flowering gorse mingled with the salty seaspray was a smell which would forever evoke

memories of this moment. When at last she opened her eyes, it was to find him gazing searchingly at her, his expression a mixture of hope and apprehension.

'Do you really want me to stay, Mary?'

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

'But will it be as friend or lover?' he demanded. From their schooldays he had always assumed that at some future date they would be married. Only recently, on seeing her with Campbell, had it occurred to him that Mary herself might have other ideas.

'When I came home from college and found you still free, I imagined that you had waited for me. Then Murdo Campbell appeared with his promise of employment and so much else. Seeing you together in the schoolroom that night, I thought that I might already have lost you.'

Mary blushed at the memory of that episode, and was obliged to turn her head away in order to compose her thoughts.

Dougal, misunderstanding the reason for her hesitation, continued with greater insistence. 'I have little in worldly goods to offer you Mary, but I am strong and willing to work hard, and I believe that I have the skills to make an ample living for us both.'

'Oh, Dougal,' she cried and turning back to him, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him full upon the mouth.

'Will you?' he scrutinised her face, willing her to confirm it . . . 'Will you marry me?'

'Oh yes, yes please!' was her reply.

PART V

Chapter 1

It had been necessary to take out the two front rows of public seating to accommodate the enlarged dock.

Apart from this, the courtroom at Inverary looked much the same to Jack as it had on that other occasion. The tiered benches were filled to overflowing. Those spectators who could not find a seat, stood crowded into every available space.

On this bleak February day, all windows and doors were shut fast. The heat generated in such a confined space, together with the stench of unwashed humanity, created an atmosphere which was quite overpowering.

The judge was none other than that same Lord Justice Chalmers who had condemned Ellen McDougal to a life of imprisonment. Now it was her brother who stood in the dock, alongside five others from the 'Battle at the Pass', as the newspapers chose to describe it.

The chief witness, James Fisk, was looking a little uneasy beneath the steady gaze of fifteen members of the jury.

'Mr Fisk,' Duncan McKay was warming to his task, 'you have stated that you witnessed the unseating of Sergeant Blake from his horse?'

The ghillie was no stranger to court procedure. He addressed the bench.

'That is so, My Lord.'

'Please tell the court what occurred,' McKay demanded.

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'Describe what you saw, Mr Fisk.' With an exaggerated air of patience, McKay succeeded in emphasising the incompetence of the witness.

'The sergeant pointed his horse at the barricade and charged.' Fisk took out a large handkerchief and mopped his brow.

'Where was Archibald Johnstone at this time?' McKay put his question almost casually.

'Sorry, sir?' Fisk looked appealingly at the judge.

'Mr Fisk, you have made written statements to the effect that you saw Archibald Johnstone attack the sergeant's mount, causing the horse to shy and unseat his rider. I ask you again, what was the position of Archibald Johnstone at the moment when the sergeant approached the barricade?'

'I could not see, sir.'

'But, Mr Fisk, you have sworn upon oath that you saw Archibald Johnstone attack the sergeant's horse. Tell the court whereabouts the defendant was standing when this attack took place.'

'It was too dark, the rising moon was casting long shadows in the pass.'

'You did not see who, or what it was, caused the horse to shy?' McKay pressed home his point.

'Not exactly, no, but when the sergeant said . . .' Fisk was interrupted by the voice of the judge himself.

'The court is not interested in what the sergeant told you, Mr Fisk. We wish to hear what it was you saw. That is all.'

'I saw the horse charge at the barricade, and rear up. Then I watched the sergeant part company with his saddle, fly over the barrier, and land head first in the bog.' Fisk basked for a moment in the titter of amusement which his statement invoked. The judge's gavel quickly put a stop to it.

'I put it to you, Mr Fisk,' McKay challenged, 'that you have no idea what made the horse shy. Any one of a number of factors could have been responsible, not the least likely being one of those shadows which you have so eloquently described.'

Fisk made no attempt to reply.

'To move on.' McKay ostentatiously examined his notes. He knew precisely what he was about to ask next.

'Let me take you further along in your statement, Mr Fisk. You say that on reaching the croft, the first of the defendants you were able to identify was Mr John, or Jack, McDougal?'

'Yes, sir.' Fisk was very confident now. 'That is correct.'

'What was McDougal doing when you spotted him?' McKay fiddled with his notes, apparently seeking his next question and not particularly interested in Fisk's response.

'He was curled up under the wall to the stockyard, wrapped in his plaid.'

'Anything else you can tell us, Mr Fisk?' McKay was looking sharper now.

'He was snoring his head off!' Fisk beamed upon his audience and there were further smothered guffaws.

'Asleep?'

'Yes, sir.' Fisk glanced at the judge, perhaps seeking reassurance that this mode of questioning was in order.

'You have given evidence that you raced all of the accused back to the croft, in order to arrive before them . . . yes or no?' McKay exclaimed.

'Yes, sir.'

'Yet McDougal was asleep when you arrived?'

'I came across him soon after, sir.'

'Had any of the others fallen asleep?'

'No, sir, I was only there just long enough to watch the men go into the farmhouse.'

'But not, presumably, Jack McDougal?' McKay asked scathingly. Without waiting for a further reply he continued, 'Is it possible, do you think, that McDougal could have been in the yard before you arrived?'

Fisk looked wary. 'He could have been, I suppose.'

'You did not see him come into the yard, wind himself up in his plaid and settle down to sleep amongst the beasts?'

'No, sir.'

'And yet you claim to have arrived at the croft well before any of the defendants!' McKay was now staring straight into the witness's eyes in a most disconcerting manner.

'Oh, yes, of a certainty, several minutes before,' Fisk replied with satisfaction.

'If McDougal was fast asleep, wrapped in his plaid, under the wall, is it not probable that he had been there for some considerable time? Too long, in fact, to have taken any part whatsoever in the affair at the pass!'

'He might have returned before the others to keep an eye on the sheep. His dogs were at his feet . . .' The ghillie had realised, too late, the trap he had laid for himself.

'Do you really expect the court to believe that McDougal, having participated in the happenings at the pass, managed to reach the croft before you, a self-acclaimed expert in that country. Do you expect the jury to believe that he immediately wrapped himself up and lay down with his flock, falling into a sleep so deep that even his dog's warning growl did not arouse him?'

To the jury the young advocate proclaimed, 'I put it to you that McDougal is telling the truth when he claims that after a day spent rounding up the sheep, he had decided to stay with them to keep them calm in the unusual circumstances, and that, against his will, he had dropped into the slumber in which this witness found him.' McKay was gratified to see an occasional nod.

'No further questions of this witness, My Lord.' He took his seat and the procurator fiscal rose to call the next witness.

McKay was soon on his feet again, questioning on this occasion Sergeant Blake.

'Sergeant Blake, the prisoner Noah Fraser is charged with the capital offence of carrying a firearm with intent to maim or kill officers of the law. Is this correct?'

'It is, My Lord.' Blake bowed his head smartly in the direction of Lord Justice Chalmers.

McKay reached across the table and picked up an ancient blunderbuss.

'Is this the weapon, Sergeant?'

Blake gave the gun a cursory glance before replying.

'That is the weapon which I took from Noah Fraser's pocket.'

McKay started in an exaggerated fashion.

'From his pocket, you say? What pocket would the lad have which was large enough to carry such a weapon?'

'He had a large poacher's pocket sewn into his jacket, sir,' Blake replied.

'Something with which you would be familiar,' McKay observed. 'Having arrested many poachers in your time?'

'Sir!' It was an affirmative reply.

'What is your opinion of poachers, Sergeant?'

'They should be hung upon the gamekeeper's gibbet, alongside all the other birds of prey!'

Duncan McKay smiled to himself. His notion that this gamekeeper turned policeman might harbour a prejudice against a boy with a poacher's pocket had served him well, and he was grateful for this snippet of information about Blake which he had received from Sergeant Kinross.

'Is it possible that you have come across the prisoner before, making more appropriate use of his poacher's pocket?'

The implication that Blake had prior knowledge of the prisoner, maybe some old score he wanted to settle, was not lost upon the jury. The procurator fiscal was quick to intervene.

'Objection, My Lord,' he claimed. 'My learned colleague's question is irrelevant.'

'Objection sustained, Mr Procurator Fiscal.' The judge nodded his approval and signalled Duncan McKay to continue.

Duncan was quite satisfied with this result. He had planted a seed in the minds of the jury . . . established that the officer could have a grudge against the lad.

'Are you quite certain that this is the weapon found on the boy?' There was a disturbance amongst the spectators as Noah Fraser's mother cried out in protest.

'Silence in court!' ordered the judge.

'That is definitely the weapon, sir. I can identify it by its age, shape and markings.'

'And perhaps by its poor condition, Sergeant?'

Duncan placed the gun in the officer's hands.

'The weapon is not loaded, Sergeant Blake. Will you kindly cock it, then pull the trigger?'

The sergeant went through the motions, but when he tried to pull the trigger he found the mechanism stuck fast. The barrel and its fittings were solid with rust.

'As you will observe, gentlemen of the jury,' pronounced McKay, 'it would have been impossible for the boy to have fired this gun.'

He returned to his questioning of the witness.

'Sergeant Blake, at what time was this weapon found on the person of the prisoner?'

'Fraser and Stobbart were both searched when I delivered them to the lock-up in Oban at one o'clock the following morning,' the sergeant replied. 'That was when the weapon came to light.'

'Was there nothing else in Fraser's pocket, Sergeant?'

'As I recall, sir, nothing one would not expect to find on any young boy.'

'No bullets? Not a powder horn?' McKay pressed him.

Warily now, Sergeant Blake gave his answer. 'No, sir, not on the prisoner's person, sir.'

Allowing the absence of both powder and shot to sink into the minds of the jury for a moment, McKay finally continued: 'Until that time, you had no idea that Fraser was carrying a weapon?'

'No, sir.'

'The defendant did not attempt to use the gun, say as a blunt instrument, in order to gain his freedom?'

'No, sir.'

'Sergeant, for the benefit of the gentlemen of the jury,' McKay nodded in their direction, 'how long did it take you to transport these two prisoners from the pass to Oban lock-up?'

The sergeant made a rapid calculation.

'About three hours,' he answered. 'There were insufficient horses, the prisoners had to walk.'

'You have described how these two captives were bound, during the fight at the pass,' Duncan McKay stated with rising excitement as he reached the climax of his questioning. 'Were they bound during the walk to the lock-up?'

'Oh, no, sir, that would not have been possible.'

'The men were attached in some way to your horses?'

'By a rope tied round the waist, yes, sir.'

'Fraser was free to use his hands then?'

It seemed a simple enough question to the sergeant.

'Oh, yes, sir,' he agreed. 'We would have taken even longer if their hands had been tied.'

'During this long march, did the defendant, Fraser, make any attempt to escape?'

'No, sir.'

'Had he done so, Sergeant, would it have been possible for him to have laid hands on the gun?'

'No doubt of it, sir.'

'But, despite your accusation that the prisoner was carrying this weapon with intent to kill or maim your men, he made no attempt either to fire the gun or to use it as a blunt instrument?'

'No, sir.'

'Thank you, Sergeant, you may stand down.'

Blake, slow on the uptake at any time, suddenly realised that he had destroyed his own case against the prisoner.

'But, sir . . .' he addressed the judge.

'But nothing, Sergeant Blake,' interrupted McKay. 'Your accusation of intent to kill has no basis whatsoever! You may stand down.'

'. . . Therefore, My Lord,' McKay was summing up for the defence, 'I submit that the prisoner, Jack McDougal, has no case to answer. It is clear from the evidence that he never left the croft, being engaged until late-evening in rounding up the sheep prior to Mr Johnstone's imminent departure. Mrs Ewan Johnstone has testified that her husband remained within the confines of the croft, being engaged in helping her to recover

such of his produce as he could before the bailiffs came to evict him. There are other independent witnesses who have confirmed that at eventide, by which time we know those involved in the offence were already at the pass, Ewan Johnstone was observed lifting his potato crop by the shore of the loch.

'The boy, Noah Fraser, admits to carrying a firearm, but denies that it was with intent to kill or maim police officers in the course of their duty. It has been demonstrated that the weapon cannot be fired, and the sergeant of police himself has confirmed that Fraser carried neither powder nor shot. Despite having had every opportunity to do so during the march to the lock-up, at no time did the prisoner attempt to use the gun as a blunt instrument. I submit, gentlemen, that Fraser carried this useless weapon as a child might, in a game of pretend. Why, look at him, he is scarcely more than a child himself!'

It was true. Noah Fraser's slim figure, his curly head hardly reaching as high as the chest of the stolid quarrier at his side, his eyes full of fear, touched the heart of every mother in the courtroom. Even the most severe of jurymen was moved by his woeful expression.

The pleading of the young lawyer continued. 'As to the accusation against Archibald Johnstone, Noah Fraser, Fergus McVicar and Thomas Stobbart, of causing an affray in an attempt to prevent the bailiff from carrying out an eviction at Johnstone's croft, the defendants plead guilty as charged, and throw themselves upon the mercy of the court.'

Duncan McKay regained his seat.

William Whylie, seated behind him, was well pleased with the way in which the young fellow had conducted his case. Whatever the outcome, he felt that they had done their best by the men.

Lord Justice Chalmers summed up.

'Gentlemen of the jury, there has been much conflicting evidence given in this court today. The case against the six prisoners is that they did each conspire to prevent the course of justice. It is up to you to decide if all, or any, of the men is guilty of that charge.

'In the case of Noah Fraser there is an additional charge, that he did carry a firearm with intent to maim or kill officers of the law, going about their duties. I would remind you that this is an offence for which there can be only one punishment.

'In the case of Archibald Johnstone, he is charged that he did lay hands upon Sergeant Blake while in the execution of his duties, causing him to be thrown from his horse, thereby suffering grievous bodily harm.

'I shall require a majority verdict from you upon each of these separate counts.'

The court stood in silence while the judge retired, to be followed immediately by the jury. The prisoners were led to the cells below the court, and the public galleries broke into a hubbub of noise and movement as the great mass of humanity stretched cramped limbs and exercised long-stilled tongues.

'Gentlemen of the jury, have you considered your verdict?' The clerk's sonorous tones rang throughout the courtroom.

With great solemnity the chancellor, or foreman, rose to his feet and turned towards Lord Justice Chalmers.

'We have, My Lord.'

In the momentary silence that followed, Jack heard a gull screaming over the loch. Oh, that he might be that bird, with nothing but the sea and the sky, the woods and hills, to confine him.

'To the charge of conspiring to prevent the course of justice, do you find the prisoner John McDougal guilty or not guilty?'

'Not guilty, My Lord.'

A long sigh swept around the room. The gavel fell, and silenced the spectators.

'To the charge of conspiring to prevent the course of justice, do you find the prisoner Ewan Johnstone guilty or not guilty?'

'Not guilty!'

Beth gave a silent cry of relief, one red and wrinkled hand clamping her mouth shut.

Archie, Fergus, Noah and Thomas were each found guilty on the first charge.

The court sat with bated breath while the clerk read out the second charge.

'In the case against the prisoner Noah Fraser, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty of the charge that he did carry a firearm with intent to maim or kill police officers in the performance of their duty?'

'We find the prisoner guilty of carrying a firearm . . .' a murmer of disapproval travelled around the courtroom . . . 'but we do not find him guilty of intent to maim or kill with this weapon.'

Expecting the answer 'yes' or 'no', the clerk did little to disguise his impatience.

'What is your verdict?' he demanded.

'Not proven!'

There was a sigh of relief from the body of the hall, a woman's voice could be heard, above the rest: 'God be praised!'

'In the case against the prisoner Archibald Johnstone, in that he did wilfully attack Sergeant Blake during the execution of his lawful duties, thereby causing grievous bodily harm, how say you?'

'Not guilty!'

The noise level had risen so high that it took several taps of the judge's gavel to bring the company to order.

Lord Justice Chalmers leaned forward in his chair to address the prisoners in the dock.

'Any citizen who takes it upon himself to impede the work of officers of the law, commits a grave crime and must be punished.

'Archibald Johnstone, Noah Fraser, Fergus McVicar and Thomas Stobbart, you have been found guilty of causing an affray, and of conspiring to impede the work of the police officers carrying out their lawful duties. You will each serve a sentence of six months' detention in Inverary gaol.

'Noah Fraser, you have been found guilty of carrying an offensive weapon. Although the jury has seen fit to dismiss the charge that you did intend harm to officers of the Crown as "not proven", this verdict means that should further evidence

come to light, or should there be any future behaviour upon your part which reflects upon this case, there could be a retrial. For your foolishness in carrying a firearm, no matter what its condition, you shall serve an additional period of two months' imprisonment. This additional term shall run concurrent with the greater sentence, provided that your conduct while incarcerated is exemplary!'

Lord Justice Chalmers let his gavel fall for the last time, thereby closing the proceedings.

Not understanding the meaning of the judge's words, Noah leaned towards the advocate. McKay's whispered explanation seemed to satisfy the boy for he straightened his shoulders and looked about him, apparently much relieved.

The judge rose to his feet, and the court remained silent until his robed figure disappeared through the door at the front of the courtroom.

Jailers released Jack and Ewan from their chains, to a roar of approval from the public gallery. Before the remaining prisoners were led away, Jack managed to speak to each in turn, promising to carry messages of hope to those at home. All six men had already served three months in gaol; those remaining would be released soon after Easter.

The winter dragged on into March that year. Even during the first days of April the winds remained in the east. Snow continued to crown the surrounding peaks, and rain fell almost continuously along the coast.

The atrocious weather made it impossible for any but the most urgent work to be carried on. The men operating the machinery were kept busy night and day, pumping out the sea water which threatened to engulf the quarries. At all costs they must preserve the precious faces from which the next season's slates would be won. The remaining quarriers, however, could do nothing until the weather improved.

Their idleness was not to be relieved by the freedom to go fishing, for the seas were mountainous, and only the very brave, or the very hungry, would venture out in a small craft.

Short of food and fuel, the people huddled for warmth in their cottages as day followed day. Closely confined as they were, it was not surprising that influenza, pleurisy and bronchitis were rife amongst the families. David, anticipating that the situation was likely to worsen, wrote again to the County Authorities demanding some form of isolation hospital.

Since I last wrote to you on this matter, the state of the people has deteriorated Poor food, lack of heating, and overcrowding are all contributing to this decline. Every day I expect to uncover my first case of tuberculosis. When that occurs I shall have no means of isolating those affected, and the disease will spread in these conditions like wildfire . . .

Two weeks later he was pleasantly surprised to receive a reply from the District Medical Officer of Health.

My Dear Dr Beaton,
The committee has given urgent consideration to your request for an isolation hospital, and I am pleased to inform you that they have agreed to supply a temporary building to be erected upon Dolby's Meadow.

The structure in question is a wooden hut, manufactured in Sweden and called a Docker Hut. You may have come across the name?

The building consists of two rooms, so that male and female patients may be separated.

I understand that the prefabricated parts will arrive during the course of the next seven days. Presumably you will be in a position to arrange for local labour to erect it?

David put down the letter disconsolately. This was no use. He had asked for a permanent building with facilities for cooking and washing, and accommodation for a nurse. He was being offered a wooden shack.

The site suggested was impossible also. Dolby's Meadow was a stretch of machair, a strip of land right at the ocean's edge, and so exposed to the elements as to have been disregarded by farmers, for all purposes save the grazing of sheep. This without doubt was why Alexander Lugas had offered it.

He grunted with disgust and disappointment.

'What is it dear?' Annabel, reading through a brief epistle from Hugh for the third time, was suddenly aware of David's dismay.

'They are offering me a wooden shed for an isolation hospital!' he declared. 'One thing is certain, even germs will be unable to survive in such circumstances. They require a normal blood temperature!'

He slammed angrily out of the room.

Annabel reached for the discarded letter and read it. After an interval sufficient for her husband to have regained his composure, she followed him into the study.

'At least the Council's response is positive for once. The site is near enough to the surgery for your convenience,' she remarked.

'And so exposed the building will probably blow away in the first storm!' he retorted, his temper beginning to mount again.

'Would it not be best to accept the provision with good grace?' she persuaded. 'If you turn down the offer, they will not make another.'

She was right, of course. Once the building was erected, the Council would have responsibility for its presence there. They would have admitted, publicly, the necessity for an isolation hospital, and would consequently be obliged to replace it with a more substantial building when the inevitable occurred.

'As always, I can rely upon your good sense, my dear,' David declared, kissing his wife lightly on the brow.

'I shall write my reply this evening,' he told her, pulling on his stout walking boots and reaching for his heavy winter coat. 'There are several calls to be made on the

island. Half the school population seems to have influenza. Anne's girl has severe bronchitis, and Mrs McDougal is very poorly. She seemed to be doing so well for a while, after Christmas. Martha's coming home to care for her made a great difference, and Jack's release was just the boost she needed. It is unfortunate that she should have contracted influenza just now. Nothing seems to shift the infection in her lungs.'

'Surely poor Katrina McDougal has suffered enough,' Annabel protested, despairingly. 'What kind of a God is it who allows so much suffering to befall such honest and hard working people?'

David, who had asked similar questions so often in the past months, could offer his wife neither explanation nor consolation.

Katrina was failing fast. David had known the moment he laid eyes upon her that her condition had deteriorated since he had last been called.

Her eyes were sunk deep into her skull, blue-black shadows cast upon the pallid cheeks. Her skin was moist, bathed in perpetual perspiration. Although her brow burned under the doctor's cool fingers, the woman shivered. Unable to do more than take samples of blood and sputum, David left her to the care of her daughter, and continued his rounds.

Katrina McDougal had never been a buxom woman, she had worked too hard and fed too infrequently for that, but she had been sturdy enough for a farmer's wife. Now she lay like a skeleton in her bed, too feeble to sit up and take Annabel's broth unaided.

Martha coaxed her mother to open her mouth and a little of the warm nourishing fluid found its way home. Suddenly, in a paroxysm of coughing, Katrina swept away both spoon and dish. As she fumbled weakly for a handkerchief, Martha tried to rescue the upset broth. Having repaired the damage as best she could, she looked up to find her mother staring in disbelief at her blood-soaked sheets.

As Katrina coughed again, more blood poured from her lips. Martha propped her mother higher for fear the blood might choke her, and ran to the door.

Jack was working nearby in the byre. He came running at the sound of her shouting.

'Quickly, Jack, see if you can stop the doctor. He was going to Mrs McGillivray, I know, and then on to the Fergusson house.'

'Why, what's amiss?' Her brother glanced anxiously into the dimly lit room behind her.

'It's Ma. She is coughing up blood . . . tell him!'

It took Jack less than fifteen minutes to locate the doctor, on his way down to the ferry landing, and they both returned to the croft house.

David had anticipated something of the sort when he had seen Katrina earlier in the day.

'I shall need to examine the samples I have taken, to make sure,' he explained, 'but I am already convinced that your mother has a particularly virulent form of tuberculosis. This haemorrhaging is positive proof of her condition, I am afraid.'

'Is there nothing you can do for her, Doctor?' Martha begged tearfully.

'She is beyond medical aid, I fear.' David's reply was not lacking in compassion. 'All that we can do is make her as comfortable as possible in her final hours.'

Jack placed an arm about his sister's shoulders, while she wept disconsolately.

'By rights she should be isolated,' David continued, 'but at least you can protect yourselves by seeing that all utensils and dishes which your mother handles are kept strictly for her use alone. All the patient's bedding and clothing must be washed frequently, by boiling, after soaking in Lysol. You, Jack,' turning to the young farmer, 'see to it that the walls and floors of this room are thoroughly scrubbed with Lysol. Bank up the fire but open the windows, so that a good breeze blows through. Katrina will need more blankets to keep her warm, but it might help save the rest of you!'

These last words were overheard by John McDougal who had come in from the yard, wondering what all the fuss was about.

He approached the bed where his wife lay, white and limp, too tired even to give him her usual smile of greeting. These last weeks she had been more like her old, cheerful self, and he had begun to hope again for the future.

'Why, what is this, lass?' he cried, taking her frail fingers between his own horny ones. 'You're no' aiming to leave me now, just when things were getting so much better for us?'

She tried to speak, but could manage no more than a single word.

'Ellen.'

The farmer turned to the doctor.

'Would they let the child come home to see her mother, do you think?'

He read upon David's countenance the impossibility of such a notion. Even if the authorities were to grant their permission, Katrina would be dead before the girl arrived.

He turned back to the bed. 'She'll be coming, lass. Just you wait.'

Martha, unable to suppress her sobs, clung to her brother.

David, without further medical aid to offer, left the sad little group to comfort one another. In the early hours of the following morning, Katrina McDougal died.

'Yes! It is as I thought,' David declared, glancing up from the microscope to acknowledge William's arrival. 'Tuberculosis bacilli. Something I had hoped never to see here in Eisdalsa!'

'But surely,' William commented as he relieved himself of his hat and cane, 'tuberculosis is a common enough disease, is it not?'

'It is a disease of the ignorant wealthy and the starving poor,' David told him. 'It is contracted, on the one hand, by foolish young women who wear less than they should, and that so tight-laced as to prevent normal breathing, who keep themselves closely confined and never take the air

when they can avoid it. On the other hand it is a disease of the poor, the overcrowded and the undernourished. With the open air life led by our fellow parishioners, I had never thought to witness a case of it here.'

'Mrs McDougal?' William had learned of the woman's sad demise as he came across on the ferry in response to David's invitation to dine.

'The very same,' he confirmed. 'I never cease to be amazed at the resilience of these people, William. I am sure that, in time, those members of the family who are left will go on about their lives, carving out new ways to survive.'

William had to agree. 'Take the Johnstones, for example,' he said. 'No sooner was Ewan released from gaol than he set out for the Lowlands in search of work on the land. It was not his way to sit around, bemoaning his lot. He assisted John McDougal and his son with the lambing of their combined flock, then left on the steamer carrying such money as had been raised from the sale of his property, following the eviction. Now, only two months later, Beth is packing up to follow him to Peebles where he claims to have found them a house and land to work.'

'The strange thing is,' David was only half listening to his companion's commentary, 'that the bacteria seem to come from nowhere, cropping up wherever conditions suit them. It is as though they laid dormant for years, centuries even, to come to life when the time is right for them!'

'Do they not travel on people's clothing and skin, as you have so often demonstrated to me in the past?' William queried.

'Why, yes.' David was struck by a sudden thought. 'Of course! Jack was incarcerated in prison all that time. No doubt he could have picked up the spores and then, in the presence of his mother, who was ailing anyway, they took hold. By God, William, you do not know what a relief it is to find an explanation. I cannot abide mysteries. Thank you, old fellow!'

William was uncertain in what way he had helped the doctor to his solution, but was content to bask in his approbation.

'While I am always happy to accept an invitation to dine at your table, David,' he observed warily, 'I cannot but suspect that, when you are so hard pressed by disease in the neighbourhood, there must on this occasion be some ulterior motive.'

'How well you know me, old friend,' David laughed. 'Truth to tell, I am offered a solution to my need for an isolation hospital. It is a poor substitute for that which I really need, but if there are to be more cases like Mrs McDougal's, I cannot look a gift horse in the mouth.'

'My dear fellow,' gasped William, only too well aware of the amount of correspondence and the degree of lobbying which his friend had entered into at County level in order to get his hospital. 'Congratulations! What excellent news.'

'You may not be so enthusiastic when you hear the whole story,' said David mournfully. 'The building is prefabricated, and of wood. Worse, the land allocated is the machair known as Dolby's Meadow, situated in the teeth of the south-westerlies.'

'Nevertheless, it is something that they have at last agreed you need such a building,' William tried to mollify him.

Not for the first time, David reflected upon how like Annabel's was William's way of thinking.

'So what can I do to help you in this?' his friend enquired.

'The hut will have to be erected on a firm base with a wall about it for protection.'

'I can certainly provide labour,' offered William, 'but whether the men will work without payment, I cannot say. There is so little money coming into any household at present, I fear there will be trouble if I do not offer some recompense.'

'I had already considered the point,' David assured him. 'And have included in my reply a summary of costs, which I hope you will approve. I fail to see how the Authorities can seek to provide a building without setting aside money for its erection.'

William examined David's calculations and could find no fault with his arithmetic.

'It may be that I should put my name to the estimate,' he suggested, 'to add a little weight to the proposition.'

The two friends pored over their papers for some time, until Annabel came to fetch them in to dine.

'I have a pleasant surprise for you,' she declared. 'Elizabeth called in, by chance, and has agreed to join us. It will be just like old times!'

'There is to be another wedding in the parish very soon.' Elizabeth was pleased to be the bearer of good tidings. The conversation, dwelling as it had upon the wave of sickness and the sad death of Katrina McDougal, had made them all uncharacteristically solemn.

'Who is to wed?' Annabel demanded, eager for any change of topic.

'Why, Mary McCulloch and Dougal McGillivray, of course,' laughed Elizabeth. 'Anne was telling me that it all happened soon after Christmas but the young couple were anxious to keep the marriage quiet until nearer the day. It has something to do with Mary's position in the school on Lunga. Anyway, she has given her notice to quit at the end of the term, and the marriage will be at Easter.'

'I must say, I am surprised,' commented Annabel, somewhat miffed that her kinswoman should have neglected to tell her the news herself. 'During the dinner at the Castle, I ventured to remark how beautiful Mary appeared, whilst she was conversing with Mr Campbell, and Dougal's reply was so sharp as to be almost rude. I thought that they must have had an argument, so fierce was he!'

'It seems that the attentions paid to Mary by Murdo Campbell created something of a stir all round,' Elizabeth explained, her eyes sparkling with merriment. 'Dougal seems to have been galvanised at last into taking action, for he proposed on Christmas Day and was accepted.'

'I overheard something of that discussion between Miss McCulloch and Campbell,' commented William dryly. 'He was becoming quite heated upon the subject of the indolence of the

working classes, and so incensed was Miss McCulloch that she gave him a piece of her mind.'

'Bravo!' Annabel clapped her hands. 'Well done, Mary.'

'The best of it was,' he said, finding difficulty in controlling his laughter, 'that the girl pointed out to Murdo that he had himself started out in the quarries and should have more sympathy with his men!'

'We were fortunate that she did not demand votes for women at the same time,' David added a trifle sourly. 'At least she might have said a word in favour of Mr Gladstone's party!'

'It is my belief she did make some remark in that vein,' William confided.

'The quarryman's vote will certainly make for a large Liberal majority in these parts,' decided David. 'Gladstone is the working man's champion!'

'I cannot say I am sorry that Mary is to leave the Lunga school, though the children will be the worse for it,' Elizabeth mused. 'Try as I might, I cannot find it in me to like Murdo Campbell. There is something about him which is not right.'

'Yes,' William agreed. 'One wonders just how he came by his vast fortune. He was, after all, a very ordinary mason when he left here in '76. Strangely enough, his departure coincided with my arrival. I remember shaking his hand and wishing him well in the Colonies.'

'Would that you might bestow a similar blessing upon your friends!' laughed David. 'For it worked like a charm.'

'I have often wondered about the other lad who left at the same time,' continued William. 'Archie McLean's grandson . . . also Archie as I recall. Until the old man died, I had news of him from time to time, but since then, there has been no word. I wonder if my magic worked for him?'

'Most probably we shall never know,' Annabel observed.

Chapter 2

The epidemic of influenza attacked every house in turn, leaving devastation in its path. Families who in normal circumstances might have shrugged off the symptoms and carried on, were so weakened by poor diet and the everlasting cold and dampness that there was no escape from the worst effects of the disease.

The youngest and the oldest fared worst. Scarcely a week went by but one or more tiny white coffins were carried to the kirkyard, cradled in the arms of sorrowing parents. Old men, whose oft-repeated tales of daring exploits, voyages of discovery, battles in Europe and the Americas, had driven their audience to the point of exasperation, were suddenly gone from the scene. Only then did the young people wish that they had listened more attentively and taken greater note of those old stories.

For the Beaton family the hardest blow was the death of their nurse and housekeeper, Sheilagh. She had accompanied Morag in her move to Eisdalsa Island, where as the years progressed, the servant had become the invalid and the mistress her nurse.

When the old woman became ill, the infection quickly found its way to her lungs. The great strain of coughing, and the difficulty she found in breathing, took its toll of a heart already worn out. In the early hours of a Sunday morning, with only Morag and Annabel at her bedside, the faithful friend and servant slipped quietly away.

Annabel had owed much to the common sense of this kindly woman in the early days of her marriage. She felt she had lost a valued confidante.

For Morag, Sheilagh's going signalled the frailty of her own grasp upon life. Overnight, she changed from a confident matriarch to a feeble, forgetful, world-weary old woman. So marked was the change in his mother that David wondered if she had not suffered a slight stroke as a result of the energy she had expended whilst nursing her patient.

Annabel was all for having Morag return to Tigh na Broch where she could be cared for properly. Her mother-in-law was determined, however, to remain in her own home. It was Dougal McGillivray's forthcoming marriage which finally provided a solution to the problem.

Despite protests to the contrary by the young people themselves, Anne McGillivray had no wish to intrude upon their privacy in those vulnerable early days of marriage. The cottage which she occupied was tied to the Quarrying Company, and should be Dougal's by dint of his employment there.

At the time when Anne was trying to find alternative accommodation for herself and Wee Annie, Annabel was seeking a suitable companion for her mother-in-law. Wee Annie would be going away to school in the autumn, so that any question of lack of space in Morag's house scarcely arose. A few days before Easter, Anne McGillivray vacated the cottage which had been her home for all but the first eighteen years of her life, and moved in with Morag, in the capacity of nurse and paid companion.

As Mary's wedding day approached, there was a flurry of activity between the three houses concerned.

Mary and Anne were engrossed with their dress patterns and materials, while Dougal, once he had bowed to his mother's insistence upon leaving the family cottage to him and his new wife, used the period between Anne's departure and the wedding day to renovate his home.

He stripped the fittings out, including the bed which he himself had always occupied in the kitchen, in order to make a larger space. He installed a stoneware sink with piped water, the cold provided by a pump attached to the main supply to the island and the hot from a boiler located behind the fire.

In the central area of the house, which divided the two rooms, he put in a water-closet, the first to be provided in one of the quarriers' cottages. This also required the digging of a cesspit for drainage, a refinement which William Whylie insisted upon in his bid to improve the sanitary conditions of the village.

The walls of the little house were whitened inside and out. Isinglass window-panes were replaced with real glass, even in the roof-lights. Finally, Dougal boarded the loft under the slates, in order to create a proper living area for any additions to the family that might come along.

New shelving and a commodious press to hold their clothing completed the work of making the McGillivrays' cottage into a home fit for the Minister's daughter.

The Thursday before Easter had been named as Polling Day. Not only in the industrial heartland of Scotland, but in the whole of the British Isles, the country was set upon Liberal reform. With the franchise now in the hands of every adult male of means, over the age of twenty-one, the vast mass of working people at last had a say in the form that government should take. Education, once the prerogative of the rich, was now available to any who sought to improve themselves. It was the age of the self-educated man, the correspondence course, and the Mechanical and Literary Institute.

On Eisdalsa, and in the surrounding countryside, there was much informed discussion as the General Election approached. Aware that the strength of the party lay in the industrial areas of the country, Mr Gladstone's supporters distributed themselves to the furthest outposts, to carry the message of hope for the future. In Eisdalsa they were preaching to the already converted.

The quarrymen flocked to the polls on the day of the election, and then waited impatiently during the three days which it took for the votes to be counted throughout the country and the result to be announced. As at the time of the Armada, Liberal Party officials arranged for bonfires to

be set up all along the coast, to be lit in case of victory. If the hilltops remained dark, it would signify a return to Tory rule, and a continuance of the war against the working classes.

Mary would have liked to follow the new fashion and wear a white gown for the wedding, but good sense prevailed. She chose a powder blue silk, which would do well for evening wear in the future and might even suffice for summer churchgoing, suitably toned down with a demure jacket.

If her dress was sensible, her bonnet was a delight. It was a tight-fitting poke, the straw dyed to match the blue of her dress. Tiny silk roses peeped from under the shady brim and a wide silk ribbon, tied over the crown and under the chin in a huge bow, completed a picture which might have been painted by Gainsborough a century earlier.

In style, the dress was right up to date. Ruched with creamy lace, the neck was high, finished at the throat by a blue and white cameo brooch which had belonged to her mother. Bustles, which had reached outrageous proportions towards the end of the previous decade, had now been abandoned altogether. Mary's overskirt was carried back behind, to fall in a simple train of modest length. To the front, the underskirt of creamy Brussels lace was only glimpsed beneath the deceptively simple folds of blue silk.

William Whylie, by some magic of his own, had conspired to provide the bride's bouquet of exotic blooms, white camellias, orchids and lilies of the valley.

The bridesmaids, their simple gowns in a darker blue than that of the bride, made a fitting foil for the pretty schoolteacher. Wee Annie McGillivray, the groom's sister, her raven locks brushed until they shone, proudly held the bride's bouquet as the ceremony began. By contrast, Margaret Beaton's golden hair was carefully dressed in fashionable long ringlets, which made her look older than her years. David caught his breath as he watched his daughter processing down the aisle towards him. She was so very like Annabel.

For once, Fraser McCulloch took a back seat in his own church. Insisting upon exercising his right to give away the bride, he had prevailed upon a colleague of his acquaintance to perform the service. Having placed his daughter's hand into that of Dougal McGillivray, he was able to sit back and enjoy the ceremony as a father should. Only the absence of his dearest Myra clouded this happy day.

Dougal had for long been his choice of a son-in-law. With his own son a missionary in Africa, and his nephew dead, Dougal had become his sole male confidant. Disturbed at the thought of being on his own, he was nevertheless comforted by the knowledge that the young people would be living only a short distance away, and now that Mary no longer worked on Lunga he would see her every day.

The knot was tied at last. As the harmonium struck up a chord, the church rang with happy voices joining in the final hymn. 'Love Divine, all loves excelling' they carolled, enthusiastically, as the bride and groom made their way towards the great door at the rear of the church.

Outside waited a line of children from the Lunga school, with baskets of paper flower petals to scatter over them. Parents and villagers stepped forward to shake hands with the groom and kiss the bride. Soon the group was joined by the congregation, everybody gathering about the bridal carriage to speed the happy couple on their way.

William had offered his spanking little chaise to carry the bridal party back to the village. Even the ferry boat had been bedecked for this very special occasion. White narcissi and yards of white ribbon were fixed in the prow, and fluttered in the wind.

As though adding her own salute to the happy pair, the steamer sailed into the bay, her hooter sounding in short, sharp notes.

The ferryman pulled strongly on the oars to avoid the wash from the great paddles, and any possibility of his precious cargo becoming swamped.

Dougal, his arm tight about his new bride, glanced up at the rail as the ship pulled in to the pier, and saw the reason for the unusual salute.

Leaning over the rail, eyes searching for the first sight of loved ones and home, were the four imprisoned quarrymen, newly released from gaol. Whatever the law might say, the men were heroes to their neighbours and it was to a hero's welcome that they had returned.

So it was that Mary's wedding breakfast became a double celebration. When the toasts had been drunk and the speeches all finished, the dancing began.

'We thought of just such a scene as this at Hogmanay,' Fergus McVicar told William Whylie as the two men enjoyed a quiet moment on the steps outside the hall. 'I cannot tell you, sir, how much we missed the company of family and friends on that day . . . it was the worst time of all.'

'Best put it behind you now, man.' William spoke brusquely to hide his emotion. Fergus had given up six months of his life and much else for the sake of friendship. William felt unworthy to receive the confidences of such a man.

'We were wrong, of course,' McVicar continued. 'After all, the law is the law. Our punishment was just.'

William had thought long and hard about the justice of the case. In a sense he blamed himself for what had occurred. Had he refused his permission for the men to go to Ewan's aid that day, none of this would have happened.

As though reading the other's thoughts, Fergus attempted to reassure him.

'Ewan raised sufficient money, as a result of the delay we created, to begin a new life in the Borders,' he asserted. 'Beth writes that they are well and happy, and getting together a good living. For that, we are all thankful.'

'So you feel that your stand was worth the consequences?' William was impressed with the man's acceptance of the inevitable.

'Undoubtedly,' was the reply. 'The bailiff should have allowed more time for the clearance. The dubious practices

of those special constables have been exposed, once and for all. Our jailers told us that the newspapers made a great show of the trial, and there was much support for our cause.'

William had followed the debate closely over a period of weeks, until other news took the headlines. He hoped with all his heart that McVicar was right. That the long period of imprisonment had been worth it.

'What now, Mr Whylie?' The quarryman at last reached the purpose of this discussion. 'Is there a place for gaolbirds in your business?'

'For loyal men and dedicated workers there is always room while orders continue to flow in,' William told him. 'We could have done with the four of you a while back, with a large consignment to find for the Antipodes. Now, the order books are empty and slates are stockpiling beside the quay.'

'Will the quarries continue to operate?' Fergus had known many times in his working life when the sales of slate had slowed, for whatever reason. In the past they had always continued with the work of making the slates, in the certain knowledge that from somewhere there would eventually come an order and that when it came, they would be ready to fill it.

'I have had to close down Number Two quarry already,' William told him regretfully. 'The cost of pumping is too great for the faces to be viable. I am planning to open a new site on the western side of the hill, inland. It is a gamble, because I do not know how good the seam will prove to be. If you can get together a team, you are welcome to make a start there, as soon as you are ready.'

'I know that Archie is anxious to get back to work as soon as possible. And as for the young lad, Noah, the sooner he gets some air in his lungs and some muscle on his bones, the better. Poor Tom Stobbart suffered badly in confinement. He coughs alarmingly. He is more in need of a doctor than a pickaxe, I'm thinking.'

'I will have the doctor look you all over before you go back to the quarries,' William decided. 'If you will all four report to

the Company Office on Monday morning, we will see if Dr Beaton considers you fit to return to work.'

The night had been darkening about them as they spoke. Now, suddenly, there was a flash of light from way down the coast. Yellow flames turned into a ruddy glow as the great bonfire on Craignish point flared up and then caught properly alight. Moments later a similar fire burst into view, probably on the Cruach of Scarba. Nearer home, the pile erected on the highest point of Lunga was lit and at the same moment, with a whoosh of gunpowder to help things along, the top of Eisdalsa hill burst into flame.

Wedding guests piled out of the hall and on to the grassy square. Their cries of delight that the Liberals had won the election rang across the bay and echoed off the cliffs on the further shore. With Mr Gladstone back in power and the promised reforms under way, things could only get better for the working man.

The musicians had emerged to find out what was happening outside. Now they lined up on the steps of the hall and began to play. The revellers needed no further bidding. Grabbing their partners they formed their sets and the reels began, growing wilder and wilder as the light from moon and stars was superseded by that from the great fire on the hill and the hundred lanterns, one in every cottage window.

In the confusion, Dougal and Mary, their happiness complete, stole away to their cottage.

Lying naked in her husband's arms, blissfully sated by their loving, Mary remembered her mother's answer to her girlish questions about marriage.

'Marriage is necessary to a girl for her protection and comfort, and for the procreation of children. Unfortunately, there are certain things required of a woman to satisfy her husband's needs. His approaches must be endured, for that is his right. After a time one learns to accept them.'

Luxuriating in the comfort of Dougal's firm body as she snuggled up to him in the narrow bed, she remembered their tentative beginning, the gentleness of his hands upon her, and

then the sudden furious passion into which they had both been transported. There had been a release of such energy that it had left her languid and him softly snoring.

Well, Mama, she thought, I could learn to accept approaches such as that very easily. Happily, she burrowed into his welcoming embrace. His arms reached out for her, even in sleep.

Stuart Beaton had at last come to terms with the fact that he was leaving Eisdalsa. His trunk was packed, his fishing tackle was stowed carefully in the barn, and his new bicycle had been cleaned and greased to keep it in good order for his return.

He had discarded his moleskin breeches and grey guernsey in favour of the neat grey flannel suit for which he had been fitted at Papa's own tailors. His brogues were burnished bright by Daisy's vigorous activity, the polish powder moistened by her tears, for this time it was her especial favourite who was about to depart.

David had been called out unexpectedly, but had promised to be back in time to drive them to the pier himself.

Stuart waited now in his father's study, moving slowly around the room, fingering familiar objects, wondering when he would see them again. He ran his hand over a row of old leather-bound books which had belonged to his grandfather, and it came to rest upon the spine of the one he loved the best.

Easing the ancient tome gently from its place on the shelf, he carried it to the desk and reverently began to turn the pages.

There were drawings: delicate pictures of herbs used in medicine; lurid diagrams of parts of the human anatomy; pictures of instruments needed in surgery. These alone had been his constant delight until he learned to read in the Gaelic. He recalled with remarkable clarity the first time that he opened a page of writing and began to decipher the ancient script. He remembered the tremendous thrill which he had experienced when he realised that he understood the words.

From then on, without saying anything to his father, he had worked his way, page by page, through the book, trying to puzzle out its contents. As his grasp of the language grew, so his task had become easier. The information contained therein was a condensation of all the medical knowledge of the time. According to the frontispiece, the book had been written some two hundred years earlier. Although David had not laughed at his interest, he had been quick to point out the many errors that the text contained and warned against taking too seriously the claims for herbal cures. Remedies which involved the use of entrails of wild animals killed at midnight, and so on, he dismissed out of hand.

Stuart listened to his father, but he could not disregard entirely the ideas contained in the book. He resolved that he would make it his business one day to translate the work into English. Then he would test the validity of some of its claims.

Once Stuart had resigned himself to the inevitable, he had not found it too difficult to forsake his beloved boats. He left behind on Eisdalsa friendships which would stand the test of time. There would be other opportunities for sailing, when he had completed his training.

He had never dismissed from his plans the idea of a naval career, but kept his own counsel on this because he knew that his father would not approve. It had been Wee Annie McGillivray who had suggested that he could combine his parent's wish for him to become a surgeon with his own desire to go to sea. He had no idea how a medical degree would lead to service in the Royal Navy, but he determined to find out as soon as possible!

There was a sound of horse's hoofs on the gravel outside the window. His father was back at last. Moving out into the hall, Stuart called up the stairs, 'Mama, the carriage is back. It is time to go!'

Annabel, leading a well-scrubbed Ian by the hand, came slowly down. He could see that she had been crying.

Why were the women so sorry to see him go? he wondered. Wee Annie had showered him with little gifts, and pestered him with demands to write to her, declaring that she would write to him every day. He had given his promise, just to quiet her, but doubted that he would keep it. Other fellows might think it strange if he sent letters to a girl!

Daisy waited by the front door, and as he hugged her and said his goodbyes, she slipped a package into his hand.

'Just a few biscuits and sweeties, Master Stuart, to see you through the first few days. I know how hungry you get.'

'Thank you, Daisy.' He kissed her on the cheek, a moist, boyish peck, but sincerely meant.

'Goodbye, Stuart.' The tiny voice was so unlike Margaret that the boy turned to look at his sister. Her eyes were red, just like Mama's. Politely, he forbore to mention it.

'Don't forget to feed the rabbits,' he said gruffly, knowing the warning to be unnecessary. Meg would never allow a dumb animal to suffer neglect.

Much to the surprise of them both, Stuart suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her hard on the mouth. 'Write to me, Meg, eh?' he begged.

'Of course.' She smiled. Already a suitable opening for her first letter was forming in her mind.

Annabel and Ian were to accompany Stuart as far as Glasgow where they would all three spend the night. Stuart was to continue his journey to Edinburgh alone, while Annabel carried out a programme of shopping and visiting friends before returning home. Ian was in transports of delight at the forthcoming trip. He had never been to the city before.

As David handed her out of the carriage on to the pier, he placed a paper in Annabel's hand.

'In case either of the boys should become ill, call upon the services of this man. He is an old colleague, working now at the Western Infirmary.'

Annabel looked suspiciously from David to the note, and then back at him. He meant Ian, of course. There was never anything wrong with Stuart.

'Why,' she demanded, 'do you suppose one of them might be ill?'

'Just in case,' he murmured. 'You never know. The journey can be quite tiring.'

Clearly uneasy at David's warning, Annabel kissed him and followed the boys up the gangplank.

They had arrived not a moment too soon. As Annabel's feet touched the deck, the paddle wheels began to turn, churning the sea into a mass of white foam.

Ian, clinging tightly to the rail, was squealing with excitement. Stuart gazed back to where his father stood gazing after them from the dock. He raised his hand in salute, brushing the corner of his eye with his sleeve as he lowered it.

Annabel glanced again at the address on the paper. Then, frowning, she slipped it into her purse.

Tom Stobbart was not too sick to appreciate the spacious room in which his bed was situated. Although the new isolation hospital was only a wooden shed, as the doctor insisted upon describing it, the building was clean and cheerful with its fresh paint.

Tom coughed painfully into the dish provided for the purpose. Dr Beaton was insistent that all sputum should be examined on a daily basis.

He wiped his mouth on a clean white handkerchief and lay back against his pillows, exhausted by his efforts.

As if waiting for this moment, the door flew open to admit Martha McDougal, her professional status characterised by the pink striped material of her uniform gown and stiffly starched white apron.

'Time for your wash, Mr Stobbart,' she decreed, determined to ignore all profests. But Tom could no more raise the energy to protest than he could contemplate jumping out of his bed

and running down to the shore . . . something which he now accomplished only in his dreams.

Martha threw open the window, which faced westwards towards the Atlantic Ocean. Tom pulled up his covers, shivering at the sudden blast of chill air.

'Och, such a fuss,' cried the nurse, stripping back the sheet in order to expose his chest. 'The fresh air is the best thing for you!'

'If that were so,' the invalid muttered feebly, 'how is it I have the disease at all? All my life I have worked in the teeth of such gales.'

'Now, now, Mr Stobbart.' Martha used what he described as her nursery voice. 'Well you know why you caught the disease. Hasn't the doctor told you himself, it was the close confinement in the County Gaol?'

No one wished to dwell upon the term of imprisonment undergone by Tom Stobbart and his colleagues, for not one villager had blamed the men for the action they took that night at the pass. This did not, however, prevent Martha from pointing out to Tom the folly of his own involvement in the affair. He had always been sickly as a child, and his own father had died of tuberculosis at an early age.

'I blame that Fergus McVicar,' she said now as she bustled about, removing the paraphernalia of the morning's ablutions. 'He should never have encouraged a weak thing like yourself to take part in that affair.'

'He was not to know we would be caught,' Tom objected, his temperature rising with the stress of arguing.

'Now, just look at you,' she exclaimed, returning to his bedside. 'All in a lather of sweat, and the doctor due any minute. What will he think of my nursing, if you are in a faint when he arrives? Just you lie still. Not another word mind!'

Tom dozed. He had not the energy to do otherwise.

David Beaton contemplated the high stone wall that William had had constructed around the weather side of the building. It certainly seemed to be doing what was intended. There

had been a few strong gales of late, but the wooden structure had remained intact. The only water getting through was that driven up under the eaves, when the wind blew rain storms from the south-west.

He checked on the fuel store, reminding himself that his next report must include a request for greater supplies of fuel as the winter approached.

Inadequate as the building was, its value had been proved if only by this one patient. Tom Stobbart's condition had been diagnosed as advanced tuberculosis immediately upon his arrival home from the prison. Had David not been able to whisk him away into isolation at once, there was no doubt that other members of his large family, accommodated as they were in a single-roomed cottage, would by now have succumbed to the disease.

David prided himself on having arrested further spread of the condition, even though there was little he could do for Tom, other than make his last months of life as comfortable as possible.

It had not been difficult to find a suitable nurse for his hospital. From girlhood, Martha McDougal had held various nursing positions in the larger houses of the district. She had learned her skills at the hands of a series of professional women, and was as useful as any hospital trained nurse.

The great advantage of appointing Martha to this post was that, when there were no patients, she could go home to keep house for her father and brother. When the necessity arose, as now, she could move into the hospital, taking up residence until her services were no longer required.

It was a mercy that there was but one male patient at present, and no females, for despite his demands for separate accommodation for a live-in nurse, the hospital building consisted of only two rooms. It had been necessary to install Martha in the female section for the time being. Plans were afoot to build a small bothy and store for the accommodation of the nurse, but as always the work could not progress without funds being available.

That must be the main substance of my next report, David told himself. He pushed open the door into the tiny entrance lobby and peered into the male ward in search of Martha.

The nurse was not present.

He shivered slightly in the chill atmosphere, colder even than the air outside. That was just as it should be. The patient was well wrapped up and certainly warm enough.

Tom Stobbart was dozing. David approached the bed cautiously. No point in waking him. He checked the temperature chart, noting with satisfaction the meticulous manner in which Martha kept her records. It showed the peaks and troughs so typical of this disease. He checked the sputum bowl for signs of blood flecks and felt some satisfaction that, for the second day running, there were none. Maybe his patient was in a period of remission. The bed rest and nourishing food must be doing some good after all.

Taking the sample with him for later examination, David slipped out of the ward, and went in search of Martha.

Another full month passed before Tom Stobbart's lungs finally gave up the fight. The quarrier was hardly cold in his grave before the Autumnal Equinox brought gales, gusting to hurricane force.

It was after a night of such winds that David's prophecy was eventually fulfilled. The following morning pieces of the Docker Hut were washed up along the shore, from Eisdalsa to Craignish Point.

Chapter 3

'Report on the public health of the parish of Kilbrennan during the year 1896 . . .'

As David wrote, he could hear through the passage which connected his study with the main house, the sounds of preparation for the celebration dinner. Delicious odours wafted to him from time to time, and the satisfactory rattle of earthenware and silver suggested that the call to dine would not be long delayed.

There was, too, the occasional guffaw, together with a quick exchange in deep masculine voices, which he still found difficult to associate with his own sons. Now Margaret's lighter tones joined in, and the higher pitch which was Ian. The lad had shot up in the past year, a beanpole nearly as tall as his brothers. Despite his love of sailing, and a preference for taking long lonely walks in the surrounding countryside, he had never developed the robust characteristics of his siblings, and the flushed cheeks which were always the result of any undue exertion did not escape David's notice. On the whole, however, the doctor was not dissatisfied with the progress that his youngest child had made, considering all the circumstances.

David was even more convinced now that he had been right to keep Annabel in ignorance of the true nature of their son's condition. Coddled and watched constantly by doting females, Ian would have become a permanent invalid. As it was, he had been free to develop his own interests, and his activities had been geared to his capabilities. David sighed and turned back to his report:

* * *

. . . there are still no means of isolation provided for persons suffering from infectious diseases, the Docker Hut having been blown away within its first year after erection.

The delay in providing such means of isolation is a great contributor to the high number of cases of infectious disease, particularly typhus and erysipelas. There has also been an increase in cases of phthisis. It is well known that consumptive patients are highly contagious To keep them in small overcrowded houses, without adequate ventilation, is to encourage a rapid spread of the disease.

His Lordship's Factor, Mr Alexander Lugas, has made known to me the availability of a disused church at Ballachuan. This is a sturdy, well-constructed building, with adequate space for all the accommodation an isolation hospital would require. I am assured that the sum necessary to refurbish would not be near as great as that to construct a new hospital . . .

From an economic point of view alone, the loss to the community by the long continuance of typhoid amongus, has incalculably exceeded the proportionately modest sum required for the erection of a hospital. From an economical point of view, sickness is more important than death, for it is the amount and duration of sickness rather than the mortality, that tell upon the community. That the hospital therefore is urgently required is evident, but also as the most important aid towards the extinction of this fever. It would not only isolate the patient but should completely obviate the reinfection of the soil, which is evidently the great danger and the cause of the persistence of the disease in our midst . . .

So he continued until the dinner gong sounded at last.

Rapidly completing the final paragraph of his report, David signed it, and pushed it aside. His fingers ached with writing

and the callus on his right middle finger, black with ink, was painful to touch.

He rose from his desk and poured himself a good measure of whisky.

'*Slainte mhath*,' he toasted the portrait of his father in its silver frame. 'What kind of a New Year will it be, I wonder, Pa?' He downed the remainder of the spirit, and hurried out to put a stop to the impatient clamour of his family.

The excitement in the McGillivray household was so intense that Wee Annie felt she might reach out and grab a handful of it.

In her time away, at the Merchants' Ladies' Hospital in Edinburgh, she had never abandoned her fierce loyalty to Eisdalsa and the friends she had left there. To Margaret Beaton she might seem worldly and sophisticated, but no one could accuse her of having forsaken her roots.

'To be frank, Meg,' she had confided, 'the girls are pretty stupid on the whole. One would suppose that an institution set up to educate the daughters of the city's impecunious merchants, and the poor children of the Burgh, would prove a centre of industry and application. Far from it, I assure you!'

'But are not all the pupils there by virtue of their scholarship?' asked Margaret, quoting from the details she had read about the school, which she herself had longed to attend.

'That may have been the initial intention.' Wee Annie laughed at the thought. 'But the school is now so prestigious that even the daughters of a Duke attend. There is hardly space available for poor little orphan girls like me!'

'But surely they are all good scholars, are they not?' Margaret persisted, unable to believe that anyone should attend the halls of academe without some special talent.

'Lord bless you, no!' cried Annie. 'Most of them are hard put to it to write their own names. They go only to learn to be ladies, to make fancy stitches, and maybe to play an instrument. Some are quite talented with a paintbrush, but very few survive classes in mathematics and literature.

I cannot wait to go on to classes in science and mathematics next term at George Watson's School.'

'Shall you attend there every day?' Margaret gained vicarious satisfaction from hearing Annie's news. Tired though her friend might be of relating the facts to all and sundry, Annie could not deny her this pleasure.

'I shall continue to reside at Merchants' Ladies',' she explained. 'But on three days each week I shall attend classes at George Watson's School . . . we shall have the same masters as the boys, although I doubt I shall actually set eyes upon them.'

'Hugh will already have gone on to the University,' said Margaret. 'But Stuart will be at the school for another year.'

Annie's eyes shone when she heard these good tidings. She had feared that he might have qualified early for medical school. By all accounts he was a dux scholar.

'What fun it would be,' she clapped her hands in happy expectation, 'were we to find ourselves in class together again!'

'Annie!' Mary was calling her from the foot of the ladder. 'If you come down now, I shall have time to dress your hair before Dougal gets back. Watch those skirts now as you step down.'

Manoeuvring her voluminous skirts in the narrow space was no problem for Wee Annie. Had she not gone up and down this ladder since she was a tiny tot?

Mary McGillivray looked even more beautiful than on her wedding day. A certain fullness in the cheeks, and a matronly thickening of the hips following the birth of her two children, only enhanced her appearance. No one seeing her now, dressed in her blue ball gown, could doubt her contentment with her life.

Three-year-old Hamish McGillivray looked up from his little pile of slate pebbles.

'Look, Aunt Annie, castle!' he cried triumphantly. Then with great abandon he kicked over the pile so painstakingly

constructed, and came to stand beside his mother. He grasped the silk of her dress in one grubby paw as he slowly absorbed the vision before him.

'Annie's a princess!' he cried. 'Annie's a princess!'

The dress bore witness to the fact that not all Wee Annie McGillivray's time was spent with her books, for she had acquired skills with a needle while at school which would have done credit to any of those daughters of the idle rich. The dress, though simple in design, gained its effect from the deep ruby silk. Annie's blue-black hair was set off to perfection by the rich colour. The low cut of the bodice revealed a creamy-white throat whose bareness called for some ornamentation.

'Wait,' said Mary, 'I have just the thing.'

She pushed past Annie into the bedroom, and after rummaging about for some minutes, emerged flustered but triumphant.

'See, here it is.' She fastened around Annie's throat a necklace of beads of rock-crystal. The stones were not precious but by clever cutting they had been made to sparkle like diamonds, picking up the colour of the gown and flashing light reflected from the fire.

'Oh, Mary,' Annie exclaimed in delight, 'it is so pretty. But I cannot wear this to the ball. You know what a clumsy creature I can be. What if I broke it and lost all the lovely beads?'

'Nonsense, Annie,' replied her sister-in-law. 'Wearing that gown, even you will find it necessary to maintain decorum at all times. There is no question of the necklace breaking!' The mock severity of her response turned quickly into peals of girlish laughter. So much noise were they both making, that they failed to hear Anne McGillivray tap lightly on the door before she entered.

The older woman stood at the door and caught her breath. What a sight the two of them made, brightening up the tiny cottage with their finery.

'Annie's a princess, Grandmama!' Hamish informed her.

'And your mother too!' said Anne, gathering the small boy into her arms and nearly smothering him with her kisses.

'Mama's going to a party,' the boy confided in his piping lisp.

'And so are we, sweetheart,' Anne told him. She put him down and went to gaze at the infant sleeping in her wicker cradle. 'You and Flora and I shall have a party here, all by ourselves. See what I have brought in my basket.'

She placed a bag upon the table and allowed the child to unload its contents. As each package gave up its secret, the boy gave a little exclamation of delight. Why was it that the things Grandmama made were so much more exciting than his mother's offerings?

Mary envied her mother-in-law her skills in baking. Try as she might, her own efforts never seemed to match up to Anne's, at least not in the opinion of her little son.

'Dougal not here yet?' Anne enquired, settling herself by the fire, prepared for the long evening ahead.

'No, there is some weighty matter afoot,' Mary replied. 'There has been a conference going on all afternoon. Mr Whylie has his duties to perform this evening, so surely they cannot debate for much longer?'

'Let us hope that all this talk results in more work,' Anne observed. 'It was a pleasure to see that Malcolm Logie has come home. Perhaps he has brought good news for Mr Whylie.'

As Mary dressed Wee Annie's hair, they talked of the good times and bad that the slate industry had witnessed in the last few years. So deeply engrossed were they, that when Dougal at last appeared, they were all startled.

'We shall be very late to the party,' said Mary, trying not to scold her husband, for she knew it was no fault of his that he was delayed.

'Why do not you and Annie go on ahead?' he replied, throwing himself into the second chair. He was obviously exhausted, and showed little inclination for the celebration to come.

'There will be plenty of splendid fellows wanting to waltz you both around the hall! I'll swear I saw Stuart Beaton talking to the McAllister boys not an hour ago,' he added,

grinning wickedly as he shared the joke with his wife.

Wee Annie blushed, and hated her brother for his dig at her sensitivities. It was no secret that she carried a torch for Stuart Beaton, but, she decided, there was no call to tease her about it.

Margaret and Annabel prepared themselves for the Hogmanay Ball at Morag's house, to avoid damaging their ball gowns on the crossing from Seileach.

As they made their last-minute adjustments, Morag sat quietly beside the fire, enjoying their chatter but glad that she had no need to go out into the cold night herself.

Morag was tired. She no longer looked forward to the next year, month, or even the coming week. Each day seemed much as the one before, and she endured them all through a sea of pain and confusion.

Arthritis had removed her ability to get about outside the house. Inactivity had reduced the efficiency of her heart and lungs to a point where the least movement caused her to fight for breath, and her pulse to quicken alarmingly.

More and more, lately, she lived within herself, her mind feeding upon past experiences. She dreamt of her husband, Hugh. She remembered long summer days by the shore with her wee boys running about, while she sat with her knitting in the sunshine. They had tried to tell her that the great fellow, who stopped by each day to give her injections of morphine was her wee Davy . . . but David was a little laddie.

They had brought to her someone they called Hugh, a tall young man with red-gold hair, who had held her hands in his and had spoken softly in tones which seemed to remind her of someone else, but it was not her Hugh.

These lovely creatures in their silks and laces, dancing about her living-room . . . these she recognised but could put a name to the girl only. What a beauty her granddaughter had become. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, with a far-away look which would intrigue, perhaps disturb, the young men with

whom she associated. She supposed that her granddaughter would find a suitable husband, but would he be one to let this little bird take flight on her own? Morag wished so much that she might live to see the girl fulfil her ambitions.

She had done her best by Margaret, and when the inevitable happened, she would discover just how much her grandmother really cared about those aspirations. The old woman smiled a secret smile and closed her eyes, for all the sparkle dazzled her.

'Well then, ladies, are we ready for the fray?'

Angus Beaton, thinner and far more grey at the temples than when last Annabel had seen him, bounded down the stairs and swept into the parlour. Resplendent in his kilt, the silver buttons on his velvet jacket gleaming in the firelight, he almost outshone the women.

'Annabel.' He took his sister-in-law in his arms and twirled her around in the confined space. 'Beautiful as ever!' He held her at arm's length for a moment, then turned to his niece.

'But who is this fine lady?' he asked in mock surprise. 'What have I done to deserve to be surrounded by such splendour!' Margaret too was waltzed around the furniture, until they all three collapsed, laughing.

Suddenly, Angus stopped in front of his mother. He crouched down before her so that she could not fail to see his face clearly.

'And you, dear lady,' he enquired. 'How are you this happy Hogmanay?'

Morag thought for a fleeting moment that it was her Hugh come for her at last, but the momentary image passed and she found herself looking into the face of a complete stranger. She smiled, because he clearly thought he knew her, but did not address him.

Angus surreptitiously felt for his mother's pulse and was not encouraged by what he discovered. Turning aside to Annabel he murmured, 'One of us should pop back from time to time. She is not too well this evening.'

'I know,' Annabel replied. 'I shall go to the party for a

short time only, for appearances' sake. Anne McGillivray wanted to remain with her, but she had promised to mind Dougal's babies so I persuaded her to go along. There are enough of us to keep Mama company throughout the night, without anyone missing all the celebrations.'

'I will stay with Grandmama,' declared Margaret, beginning to pull off her elbow-length gloves.

'Not tonight, Margaret.' Her uncle stopped her. 'Hogmanay is for the young people. You go and enjoy yourself, and leave the care of your grandmother to old fogies like myself!'

Turning to the old lady by the fire, he said, brightly, 'I shall escort these two fine creatures to the ball, Mama, and then I shall return to sit with you for a while. Will you like that?'

Morag felt she was expected to respond. She smiled and nodded her head although she wondered what she and this stranger would have to talk about.

Margaret was pleased to find that her brothers had preceded them to the hall. She hated to join that group of girls who arranged themselves along one side of the room, each hopeful that at some time in the evening one of the village swains might ask her to dance. At least she and Annie had an excuse to join the group of gangling, pimply-faced young men huddled near the entrance, pretending that they had no interest in the females opposite.

'Where is Mama?' Hugh asked his sister. 'I have a message for her from Pa.'

'She is talking to Katherine Logie, over there.' Margaret pointed out a knot of ladies, seated close to the trestle-tables which, sagging under their generous bounty of food, stood at the far end of the hall. 'Uncle Angus is a little anxious about Grandmama. Mother may not stay, after all.'

'In that case my message hardly matters,' said her brother. 'It was only to give Father's apologies for being held up. Some anxious parent called him out to her bairns, just as we were leaving. He was all dressed up in his finery . . . let's hope they don't vomit over him or do something equally disagreeable!'

Margaret hated the casual way in which both her brothers used such terms. It was only showing off. Proper doctors, like Papa, were most particular not to offend a lady's sensitivities!

'Good evening, Stuart.' Wee Annie, her unaccustomed finery making her unusually shy, had stood patiently behind her friend for long enough.

'Good Lord!' that young man exclaimed, noticing her for the first time. 'You look stunning, young Annie. Don't she look gorgeous, Hugh?'

He nodded, lost for words. The sight of the girl he loved, resplendent in her ball gown, had quite taken his breath away. He was so dumbstruck by her beauty that he could only stammer his reply.

'Y . . . yes, indeed,' he laboured. 'Y . . . you both look wonderful.'

At that moment the fiddle struck up a lilting tune, and was quickly joined by Wully McGreggor's accordion. Instantly feet began to tap out the rhythm and one or two courageous couples took the floor.

While Hugh hesitantly formed in his mind the words to invite Annie to dance, his brother stepped in and forestalled him.

'Come along, Annie McGillivray.' Stuart pulled her by the hand. 'Let's see what that fancy school has taught you about dancing.' He whirled her away into the throng, leaving both Margaret and Hugh feeling somehow abandoned.

Margaret regarded her elder brother with sympathy. Did he not realise that Annie had eyes only for Stuart? She recognised pain in his expression, and hated to see him so hurt.

'Will you not ask me to dance?' she enquired, squeezing his hand comfortingly. 'I may not attend an Edinburgh academy, but Aunt Elizabeth is a very good instructress.'

Hugh smiled down at his sister, thought how pretty she was, and proudly guided her out on to the floor.

*

William Whylie had sent his apologies to the organising

committee. For once, he would be too late arriving to open the proceedings formally.

It had been a busy afternoon but, on the whole, he was well satisfied with the outcome of their deliberations.

Malcolm Logie had returned earlier in the month with a large order for roofing slates for the city of Melbourne which, he assured William, would absorb all the slates that Eisdalsa could produce for a number of years.

'It is the usual story, William,' the agent explained. 'The city fathers will buy from whoever gets his boats there first. If you can send the first five million before June, they will give you a contract for as many more. There is competition, mind. The Welsh have got wind of the market, and will be bending every effort to reach port before you. Fortunately, the Burgh Engineer is a Scot from Argyll. He will buy from here or Ballahulish for preference. I happen to know that your rivals up north are already deeply involved with an order for rebuilding in the centre of Edinburgh, and cannot compete in the Antipodean trade!'

'If only this news had come a little sooner,' William sighed. 'There was a stockpile of two million slates standing on the quay for over a year. So much had accumulated that I had to reduce the working hours of every crew. Had it not been for an order to roof the new house and steadings at Johnstone's croft, they would be there yet.'

'That could not have reduced your stocks by much,' Malcolm Logie protested. 'It may be a large house but it is hardly a city.'

'That is true,' answered William. 'But the proprietor extended his order to include the building of a new hospital on the south side of Glasgow, and that took most of the remaining store of large slates. We were left with a quantity of undersized slates which I gave to the men to repair those cottages still roofed in thatch.'

'So what stocks do you have?' Malcolm demanded, fearing that his efforts on behalf of his home company might be to no avail.

'No more than the two million that the men have cut since August. It was a wet autumn, which reduced the working hours even more.' Then, seeing the look of disappointment upon his colleague's face, he continued, 'Murdo Campbell has a stockpile. Exactly how large I do not know, but I am prepared to undertake to buy some of his slate to make up this first order. He is not my favourite business partner,' he added with a frown, 'but if I am obliged to seek his co-operation in order to gain that contract, I shall do so willingly.'

'Provided the ships can sail by the end of April, with five million slates aboard,' Malcolm declared, 'it will matter little to the population of Melbourne from which particular quarry they are dug!'

'I will make it my business to tackle Campbell on the subject as soon as this holiday is over,' William decided. 'A contract of these proportions could keep us going into the next century.'

'I will not keep you from your duties any longer, William.' Malcolm Logie made ready to leave.

'But you will take a dram before you go out into that cold night.' It was an offer which Malcolm was only too ready to accept.

As Whylie hunted out clean glasses and the bottle of malt whisky reserved for special visitors, Logie settled himself more comfortably in his chair. For many years now he had been a free agent whose only loyalty to this particular company lay in his beginnings here at Eisdalsa. Although their relationship had changed subtly over the years, and he had eventually bowed to William's request that they address one another by their Christian names when in this office, Malcolm was transported back in time and felt like a company servant once again.

'You mentioned the new house at Johnstone's croft,' he commented, accepting the brimming glass from William. 'Has anyone met the owner? I understand he is something of a mystery.'

'I have dealt only with his surveyor, a pleasant enough fellow called Platt,' William explained. 'The documents all

tell me that I am negotiating with a Mr McLean, but there are so many of that name from this part of the world that we are still no wiser as to his identity.'

'No doubt he will make himself known, in due course. The women are all agog to find out who it is. I have heard little else from Katherine since I got home.'

'I am surprised that your daughter is still a spinster, Malcolm,' William mused. 'Is she totally dedicated to her profession, do you think?'

'I had always anticipated that she would marry Murdo Campbell,' he replied. 'When the lad left for Africa, it was on the understanding that he would either return to marry her, or send for her to join him. Coming back from one of my trips to the Far East, I found them no longer on speaking terms. Katherine has never offered an explanation, and I have never asked for one.'

'From what we have seen and heard since his return, your Katherine did well to break her connection,' William assured him. 'He is not the best tempered of men, as the attitude of his workforce makes clear.'

'I have heard that there has been unrest from time to time. Is it serious, do you think?' Malcolm was concerned about getting his order fulfilled. Industrial action could jeopardise all their futures.

'Things have been pretty quiet this last year,' William reassured him. 'But there was an incident two years back when the police had to be brought in to prevent a riot. Fortunately both parties saw sense at the last minute, and the problem was resolved.'

'I cannot say that I was disappointed at the way things turned out between Katherine and Campbell,' Logie observed. 'But I would dearly like to see her happily settled with someone soon. I am not getting any younger, and the constant travelling exposes me to all manner of hazards. I am the only close relative the girl has in the world, you know.'

William rose to his feet.

'The committee will forgive me for not being present at

the start,' he explained, 'but even I would not be excused if I missed the toast to the New Year. If you will forgive me, I must go home and change.'

David, looking uncharacteristically dishevelled, arrived in the hall a few minutes after William. He looked around for members of his family, and spotted Margaret, dancing with her uncle. He made his way to where Hugh stood talking to the McAllister brothers. Exchanging greetings with the two young men, David drew his son aside.

'I don't see your mother anywhere, Hugh. Has she not arrived yet?'

'Uncle Angus was a little unhappy about Grandmama,' Hugh explained, 'so he and Mother are taking turn about, watching her. I offered to do my share but they would have none of it.'

'I'll stay to the end of this dance and have a word with Angus,' David decided. 'Then I will go and relieve your mother myself.'

Hardly had the music ceased when there was a small disturbance at the entrance to the hall.

A tall figure in full Highland dress stood shaking hands with some of the older members of the community. As he moved forward into the room the light caught his neatly trimmed but generous red beard, and for a moment David thought he had seen a ghost.

While David's father had acquainted him with the mysteries of his own profession, it had been old Archie McLean who had given to David and his brothers a knowledge of the sea and all its ways. Beside the fire, on long winter evenings, he had filled their heads with folk tales of ancient men and strange customs. Could it be Archie standing there? Indeed it was. Not the poor old man whose last painful, lingering hours, David had watched over, powerless to do anything to help him, but his grandson, a man in his prime, fit and prosperous by all appearances. David advanced towards the newcomer, his hand outstretched in welcome.

'Archie McLean, by all that's wonderful!' he exclaimed, shaking him vigorously by the hand. 'We had no word that you were coming home. How have you fared all these years?'

'Well enough, Dr Beaton, well enough!' The Scottish brogue was overlaid by a faint colonial twang, from where it was hard to tell. 'I was not sure if I would be welcome here, gatecrashing the Hogmanay festivities, but it seemed a good opportunity to announce my reappearance to as many old friends as possible.' Archie was forced to acknowledge first one then another greeting as old comrades from his quarrying days came forward to speak.

'Are you here to stay?' David asked, between these interruptions.

'Oh, yes,' McLean explained. 'I have acquired a small property over Ballachuan way where I intend to spend most of my time from now on.'

William had now joined them. 'But of course!' he cried. 'It's "THE" McLean!' Both David and Archie stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'I beg your pardon,' William apologised, recovering from the shock of this revelation. 'You must understand that there has been a lot of speculation as to who the new tenant at Johnstone's might be. With so many of your clansmen in these parts, we were not to know that we were dealing with a McLean already known to us!'

Word quickly went around the company that Archie McLean was back, and that it was he who was responsible for the eviction of the Johnstone family. The smiling faces soon took on a grimmer look, and those who had been crowding forward to welcome their returned comrade shrank away.

The change in attitude was not lost on Archie McLean. Confused, he sought some explanation from William, drawing him aside for a private discussion.

'But, Mr Whylie,' he declared, having heard the story of the eviction, and the terrible consequences for those who had fought for Johnstone's rights, 'I had no knowledge of these occurrences. I was given to understand that the property

had been vacated some time previously, and that the land formed part of the Ballachuan estate. My dealings were all directly with Mr Patrick Campbell and the tenant of Ballachuan, a Sir Henry Munro.'

'No doubt the people here feel that you must have known that the land you were seeking belonged to the Johnstone family. As I understand it, they have farmed there for generations.'

William was trying to remain neutral but he could appreciate the attitude of the local people. McLean, whom they considered to be one of themselves, had proved himself a traitor, a person capable of trampling upon the lives of his friends in order to gain his own ends.

'I can assure you, Mr Whylie, that had I known that my purchase of the lease would bring about the eviction of a family, I would have withdrawn from the contract immediately.'

Archie McLean looked so concerned that William could not but believe him innocent in the matter.

'The eviction took place some time ago,' he explained, 'Johnstone has found other employment and moved his family to the Lowlands. If reports are true, he is making a better living in the Border country than he could ever have hoped to achieve had he stayed here.'

'Nevertheless,' McLean protested, 'I shall be seen as the villain in the piece unless I can put my side of the story.'

'No time like the present for scotching a rumour which could tarnish your reputation and make life in the community intolerable. If you are willing, I shall refer to the matter in my speech, and even invite you to add your own comments if you so desire.'

'I would be obliged, sir.'

At that moment, Archie caught sight of a familiar figure. Katherine Logie swept past, dancing in the arms of David Beaton.

'I see no sign of Murdo Campbell here this evening,' he observed. 'Is it not unusual for Mrs Campbell to attend such an affair without her husband?'

'Mrs Campbell?' William was puzzled. 'Mr and Mrs Campbell are unlikely to grace us with their presence.'

Archie was unable to disguise his confusion.

'When last I saw him,' he explained, 'Murdo Campbell was boarding a ship in Cape Town, on his way home to marry Kate Logie. I naturally assumed that they had long been husband and wife.'

'Miss Logie is still unmarried,' William assured him. 'And like to remain so, according to her father.'

'Malcolm Logie, is he still here? Oh, but I see he is.' Archie raised a hand in greeting to the agent, and received a friendly nod in response.

Excusing himself, Archie made his way eagerly to where Malcolm stood, arriving at the precise instant at which Katherine joined her father. In his ignorance of past events, Malcolm made the newcomer welcome, but Kate stayed aloof, answering McLean's solicitudes with a coolness which he found disconcerting. Had there been time to query her attitude he would have done so, but at that moment a gavel summoned the assembled company to order, to hear William's speech, welcoming the New Year. This had become a tradition over the years, and he found it more and more difficult to bring some fresh thoughts to the occasion.

'My friends,' he held up his hands to quiet the cheers and laughter which greeted his ascent to the podium, 'the years pass so quickly . . . it seems only yesterday that I last addressed you upon the subject of the New Year, and the new beginnings which come with it.

'Tonight I am able to reassure you that there is work and plenty to occupy us all in the coming months. You will have welcomed your old friend, Malcolm Logie, in your midst tonight. How much warmer will be your greetings when I tell you that he has brought with him the prospect of a huge order from the Antipodes for Eisdalsa slates!'

The hall rang with the cheers of the islanders. William raised his hands again to hush them.

'Another old acquaintance has returned to us tonight. I am

very pleased to welcome home Archie McLean, who tells me that he has spent the last few years in Africa and Australia but has now returned to settle down among us. His building projects have already brought work to the quarries, and we are grateful to him for his order for slates, a contract which tided us over a very lean time in the past months.'

A sullen silence followed William's observations. Then, from the depths of the assembly, someone cried, 'Judas!' and suddenly a tumult of harsh voices threatened to drown William's words.

'Gentlemen, ladies,' for the female protests were as vociferous as those of the men, 'please hear me out. In acquiring the property at Ballachuan, Mr McLean conducted his business from abroad. He tells me that he was misled into believing that Johnstone's croft was vacant property at the time of the negotiations.'

There were a few further murmurings, but others now were trying to silence the protestors so that they could hear what was said.

'Archie McLean grew up here, and worked alongside many of you. I met him only once before, on the day that he left for work abroad, but I believe him to be an honourable man who intends nothing but good by returning here to invest some of his fortune in the place which gave him birth.'

The comments now grew more friendly. A voice called from the back of the hall, 'Let's hear from Archie himself!'

The cry was taken up by others, and soon the clamour brought McLean to the rostrum.

'I would like to thank Mr Whylie for his support in this sorry affair,' he began. 'As he says, we have met only once before, and that fleetingly. But others of you know me, and you knew my father. I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I was not a party to the eviction of Ewan Johnstone, and would never have condoned such action. I understand that the Johnstone family is now comfortably settled elsewhere, and I thank God for that.'

'Amen,' said a few. The onlookers were now more interested than angry.

'You will know that I have built a house at Ballachuan in which I intend to spend most of my time. In my travels I have come across a wealth of flora, growing in climates similar to this. It is my intention to plant a garden in which to nurture these exotic species. The work will take many years, and will require the services of skilled masons and labourers as well as gardeners. It is my intention to employ local materials, and wherever possible local labour. It is my fond hope that when the work is completed, my gardens will bring pleasure to a great number of visitors, amongst whom I shall be proud to welcome the people of Eisdalsa.'

They were completely won over. The clapping and cheering all but drowned out the sound of the bell, ringing at the head of the harbour to welcome in the New Year.

On the stroke of twelve, William raised his glass to the company. 'A Happy New Year to one and all!' he cried, and immediately the band struck up with *Auld Lang Syne*.

William placed a friendly hand on Archie McLean's shoulder and steered him towards David and Annabel, standing with Angus Beaton and the young McGillivrays.

'A Happy New Year to you, old friend,' declared David, shaking William by the hand.

'A Happy New Year, Annabel.' The engineer caught Mrs Beaton in his arms and kissed her in a manner he would never have presumed to employ in other circumstances.

In the relaxed atmosphere which followed William's speech and Archie's own remarks, the islanders again approached with their own individual greetings for the new tenant of Johnstone's croft.

Whatever name Archie might have envisaged for his new mansion, the property would forever be known locally as Johnstone's. In view of recent history, and its long association with the Johnstone family, Archie was quite content with that. When, six months later, a granite plinth was unveiled

beside the gateway to the property, no one was surprised to find the word JOHNSTONES carved upon it.

Annabel had seen her mother-in-law comfortably settled in her bed before joining the company in the hall. She and David had managed two dances together when she announced that she must return to see that all was well with the old lady.

'Oh, Mama,' Margaret protested. 'You have had so little time to dance this evening. Let me go and sit with Grandmama for a while.'

Annabel would have refused her daughter's offer, had not David insisted that he had had no fun so far this Hogmanay, and begged his wife to stay a while longer.

'Oh, very well,' she agreed reluctantly, 'but if you are in the least bit worried, you will run back and tell us, won't you?'

'Of course, Mama.'

Margaret slipped out into the night. The wind had dropped a little and the air was very still. Fluffy white clouds flitted across the blackness of the heavens, and were caught in the beams of the Fladder light, which flashed its warning to shipping some three miles away, to the south of the island. Between the banks of vapour, bright stars twinkled. Margaret sought out the Milky Way, and spotted Orion. Then, her eyes now properly adjusted to the light, she found the Plough and traced the Polar Star, which seemed to stand immediately above her grandmother's house, on the far side of the harbour.

Pulling her cloak about her, for the air was chill, she hurried off into the darkness.

She picked her way across the rough slate stone path to her grandmother's house.

It was warm and cosy in the parlour. The lamps had been turned down low. By the red glow of the dying embers, she saw that the room was empty.

She raked the ashes and placed more coal to rekindle the flames. Once they were leaping upwards, reaching for the chimney, she banked the fire with peats.

Her grandmother occupied a bedroom on the ground floor, just across the hall. Margaret tiptoed in, to assure herself that the old lady was asleep.

Morag lay upon her back, her grey head almost buried in the snowy lace-covered pillow.

Gnarled hands lay upon the coverlet, the wrists like sticks, the bones protruding through dry skin which was stretched to transparency and mottled brown with age. The chest rose and fell with satisfying regularity, and, open-mouthed, Morag snored gently in her sleep.

Margaret reached for a volume of poetry she had been reading earlier that day. Turning the lamp a trifle higher, she settled down in the wicker chair beside the bed and began to read.

She must have dropped off for a few moments because suddenly she was startled into wakefulness. Her book had slipped from her fingers on to the floor. As she stooped to retrieve it, Margaret glanced at her grandmother and saw that Morag was awake.

Gently she lifted one frail hand, stroking the skin, a gesture she knew that her grandmother found comforting. The old lady turned her head and saw the girl with great clarity.

'Why, Margaret, how beautiful you look tonight.' Her voice was stronger than it had been for many weeks. 'Tell me, was it a good party?'

'Oh, yes,' she answered, 'it was really warming up when I left. Happy New Year, Grandmama.' She kissed the fingers and continued to keep them tenderly in her grasp.

'You should be there with all the young people,' Morag protested. 'Youth slips by so quickly, you must not miss a moment of it.'

'I would rather be here with you, Grandmama,' Margaret assured her. 'Is there something I can get you? A warm drink perhaps? Would you like a little milk?'

The old head shook, almost imperceptibly.

'No, dear, I shall just lie here and wait.'

'Wait for what, Grandmama?' The poor soul was wandering again for she began talking to someone who was not there.

'It has been a long time,' she murmured, smiling. 'But I knew you would come at last.'

It was very disconcerting. Morag was speaking to someone standing behind Margaret's left shoulder. Although she knew they were alone, Margaret could not resist a sideways glance. The situation would have been disturbing enough in daylight, but on New Year's Day, in the early hours of the morning . . . She shivered slightly, and turned up the lamp. The feeling that they were not alone did not diminish but she no longer felt frightened. A deep sense of peace had stolen over her.

Morag's fingers moved on the counterpane. The sound startled the girl, and she jumped. Suddenly the withered hand reached out and grabbed her with alarming strength.

'Don't let them stop you, Margaret . . . you can do anything . . . anything. Do you heed?'

'Yes, Grandmama,' the girl replied, but the old woman did not hear her. The hands lay motionless upon the counterpane. The grey eyes stared, unseeing, from their sunken sockets. As the muscles of the face relaxed in death, the mouth regained its normal, pleasant curve.

Margaret was surprised to find that she was not afraid. She had never seen the face of death before, and could only marvel at the tranquillity of her grandmother's departure. Who had she seen in her last conscious moments? Grandfather Hugh, perhaps?

With extreme gentleness, she placed her fingers over the staring eyes and closed the lids. Now Morag looked as though she was sleeping. Only the silence told Margaret it was not so.

'Goodbye, Grandmama,' she whispered.

She turned down the lamp, and crept out of the room.

Chapter 4

David read the document through a second time, unable to absorb the full impact of its contents.

'When did my mother make her will, Mr McKay?' he demanded. It might be that she had been deranged at the time, he thought. She had certainly been extremely confused during the last few months.

'I was introduced to Mrs Beaton by Mr William Whylie, shortly after the trial of the McDougal girl,' Duncan McKay explained. 'It seems that your mother was anxious to keep the nature of her bequest secret, and consequently sought out a lawyer previously unconnected with the affairs of the family.'

'Yes,' David observed quietly, 'I can see why.'

'Since your daughter is still a minor, it will naturally fall upon you, Doctor, to administer the legacy on her behalf. Clearly, your mother considered that part of the money should be used for educational purposes, so I am sure that it will be in order for you to authorise payment of school fees, prior to her twenty-first birthday, if that is your daughter's wish. Mrs Beaton makes it quite clear that it is her intention, by means of this bequest, to give Miss Beaton a certain independence. I understand that she has ambitions to become an author?'

'Thank you, Mr McKay,' David interrupted, quite brusquely, 'I think that I am the best judge of how my daughter's legacy shall be used.'

'Well, yes, of course.' The younger man hesitated before repeating the terms of Morag's will. 'As Mrs Beaton's executor, it will be for me to decide whether any use to

which the money is put is in compliance with the terms of the will. You do understand this?'

David struggled with his annoyance. There was nothing to be gained by antagonising McKay. There might well come a time when his co-operation would be all important.

'I shall, of course, need to discuss the implications of the bequest with my wife and daughter, Mr McKay. Now, may I offer you some refreshment? If you are travelling back to Inverary by road, you will need a meal. Perhaps you would care to join us for luncheon?'

'That is most kind.' McKay, relieved that his business was completed without any outward display of the temper about which Morag had warned him, felt it expedient to remove himself while the going was good. 'But if you will forgive me, I have business at the Castle before I return home. No doubt you will contact me with regard to any decisions which are made concerning your mother's will?'

David saw his visitor out by way of the surgery, and walked with him to where the hired dogcart awaited him.

'I suppose it will not be long before the horse is replaced by one of these confounded motor cars which are all the rage down south,' Duncan observed as he swung himself up beside the driver.

'One thing is for certain,' David assured him, 'no internal combustion engine will ever succeed in climbing Smiddy Brae!'

He stood watching as the small horse-drawn carriage negotiated the narrow lane which led to the top of the hill. Turning on his heel, he wandered back to the house. In his mind he tried to formulate a plan by which this new problem, set by his mother of all people, was to be tackled.

Ian Beaton watched his uncle directing the loading of their baggage on to the train. Smoke belching from the locomotive obscured his last view of Oban Bay, and he wished, not for

the first time, that they were travelling by sea in the normal manner.

For some reason, Pa had insisted that the journey by train would be less tiring, although Ian and Angus had been obliged to walk up two hills on their way here by road, and once arrived at the station, it had been necessary to engage a pair of porters to handle the luggage.

At least he was spared the tearful farewells of his mother and sister, in public. These had been endured more privately at Tigh na Broch and, thankfully, there had been no awkward delay to add to the pain.

Annabel had been adamant that her youngest child should not be sent away from home to attend school. Tales of tough athletic activities, fighting and bullying, which on the lips of her more robust sons sounded like a series of adventures and misadventures, to be enjoyed or endured with equanimity, filled her with apprehension when she considered them in relation to Ian's frailty.

Even David was forced to admit that the lad might fare better remaining at home, and receiving his tuition privately. There was also the advantage that Ian might take on the role of apprentice to his father, one which had not been filled for several years.

In routine tasks in the dispensary, and as an assistant on the rounds, Ian had very quickly made himself indispensable. He showed a remarkable ability to absorb information, and considerable skill when it came to bandaging and so on. So far did David come to rely upon his assistance that when the time eventually arrived for his son to take up his studies in medicine, at Edinburgh University, the doctor seriously considered engaging another apprentice to take his place.

David often compared his three sons, each well fitted for the medical life to which he had been born, but each approaching it in a different manner.

Hugh was a good, solid plodder of a student. He would make the kind of general practitioner who spends his life

in one place, knows all his patients intimately, and is loved by everyone.

Stuart was the high-flyer. He was destined for the kind of prestigious career which his father, by force of circumstance, had been obliged to forgo. For Stuart, research would take precedence over the finer feelings of his patients.

Ian was a physician by instinct. He was a natural healer, and if David were not so pragmatic, he might have recognised a fey quality in the young man, handed down perhaps from his Hebridean ancestry. Ian was able to establish a rapport with the most catankerous of elderly patients, and could charm the most obstinate infant into taking unpleasant medicine.

More importantly, the boy had an uncanny knack of recognising the cause of a patient's problem, simply by observing the physical signs which were presented.

David had avoided making any comment upon this particular aspect of Ian's work, but he could not ignore the boy's ability to jump to the correct conclusion, and on more occasions than he cared to admit to, the doctor had come to rely upon his son's opinion in a difficult case.

'That seems to be everything.' Angus Beaton came striding along the platform towards him. 'Goodness knows what you had in that wooden crate, Ian. It took three men to lift it into the guard's van!'

'Books, Uncle, nothing more.' He stepped forward and opened the carriage door for his uncle. It was so much a part of the scheme of things in Ian's life that he left the lifting and carrying of heavy objects to others, it would no more have occurred to him to help the older man deal with his luggage than fly to the moon. Although his parents never spoke of any disability, or admitted to his receiving special treatment, Ian had from early childhood been aware that he was cosseted for some mysterious reason. As he grew older, he read his father's medical books and was soon fully conversant with his own condition. From then on, there had been no need to discuss it. Everyone within

the intimate circle in which he lived understood and made allowances. That must inevitably change now. Ian was under no illusions about the difficulties he was about to encounter when he came face to face with people who did not know his history, and were unaware of his limitations.

Hardly had the two of them settled in their carriage than the whistle blew, smutty black smoke wafted back from the engine, and with a jerking of carriages and a rattling of couplings the West Highland train left, as always, on time.

As the engine pulled its string of carriages up, out of the town, and into the narrow cutting which carried the line through Glen Cruitten, it became clear that a great deal more rain than normal had fallen in the last twelve hours. Streams tumbled over boulders and cut their way relentlessly through gorges in white foaming torrents. In the narrow railway cutting it seemed that these great waterfalls must wash away the track, but miraculously, as the locomotive approached each raging burn, the waters were seen to disappear below ground in culverts, to emerge on the further side of the track and join together on their unflagging journey to the sea.

Angus sat in one corner of the carriage, engaged in reading and correcting the proofs of his latest manuscript. It had been fortuitous that he found himself obliged to visit his publisher at the same time as Ian was due to go to Edinburgh. Annabel would certainly have insisted on accompanying her son herself, had not Angus suggested that they travel together. Ian could think of nothing so inappropriate as arriving to take up his University place, accompanied by his mother!

With an exclamation of disgust, Angus Beaton slashed through a complete sentence and scribbled hurriedly in the margin.

'You would think that amongst the whole army of typesetters in this land, there would be one who understands the Gaelic language,' he observed. 'Such stupid mistakes!' Angrily,

he threw aside the papers and joined Ian in his contemplation of the scenery.

'Your father and I used to be taken to Loch Awe for the fishing,' he explained, as he found himself able to reel off the names of all the villages between Taynuilt and Dalmally.

'In those days, travelling involved a sea trip via Oban and Loch Etive, before we could disembark at Taynuilt and make our way by drover's road around the base of Ben Cruachan.'

'Did you have a carriage waiting for you, then?' Ian asked, always ready to listen to his uncle's reminiscences of his childhood.

'Lord, bless you, no!' exclaimed Angus Beaton. 'We walked the whole eight miles to St Conan's Kirk. There was a bothy there which belonged to a cousin. That was where we slept, going out on the loch each day in a small boat. Oh, what times we had. The fish were so much larger and more willing to come to the line in those days!'

Ian could not help smiling. Only a week before he had sailed with his uncle out to the Garvelochs, and caught nothing all day.

The locomotive chugged its way into Connel station and hissed and rumbled to a stop. There was much commotion surrounding the guard's van, a certain amount of shouting, and then a scramble into their carriage as two gentlemen and a young woman boarded the train. Ian, whose experience of the opposite sex was limited to his sister and her friends, was quite enchanted by this glorious vision, and made little attempt to hide his admiration.

The whistle blew and the carriage shook as the train gathered momentum.

Angus immediately got up to help the female passenger to place a somewhat cumbersome portmanteau on the rack. She clearly felt that the younger man should have offered, for having accepted help from his uncle, she gave Ian a penetrating stare and sniffed her disapproval that he should allow this old gentleman to perform a function so clearly more suited to himself.

The other two passengers settled themselves at the far end of the carriage, and engaged immediately in a heated discussion involving who had packed what, where, and why it was not here in the carriage instead of in the guard's van.

'Oh, it really is too bad,' protested a lean, swarthy gentleman dressed in knickerbockers and calf-length boots. 'I had intended to work out the route while we were aboard the train, to avoid wasting time when we arrive at Dalmally.' He fussed determinedly with the contents of a small rucksack, clearly unconvinced that the missing map was not hiding in there.

His companion, a stouter, less anxious individual, evidently more inclined to accept the inevitable, sat back, observed his fellow passengers under hooded lids for a few moments, then promptly fell asleep.

The young woman sat very straight, her hands in her lap. She looked decidedly warm after the energetic battle to secure a seat, and one wisp of chestnut brown hair had escaped from beneath her extravagant hat which was heavily trimmed with silk flowers and velvet ribbons in the height of fashion.

Deftly, she rearranged her headgear to recover the wayward tress of hair. From her central position in the carriage, she was obliged to peer across her fellow travellers in order to observe the countryside. Ian, appreciating the cause of the woman's disapproval of him, sought to redress the balance by lifting his cap, and suggesting she might prefer to take his corner seat. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded her acquiescence and they changed places.

The arrival of strangers had put paid to Angus's reminiscences, and both men now studied their books. From time to time, Angus gave vent to expressions of dismay or disbelief, and wielded his pencil with some ferocity, but he managed to control his language in the presence of a lady. Ian opened the medical text he had been studying, and was soon intent upon it. As he turned a page, he uncovered an anatomical diagram in lurid colours. There was a sharp intake of breath from the young woman, and Ian glanced up to see her, very red in the face, staring fixedly through

the window. Hastily, he turned to the next page, but the damage had been done. All the woman's fears appeared to have been confirmed. Her opinion that this was indeed a lewd, disgusting creature, to be ignored at all costs, showed in her face.

The Pass of Brander is the route by which the River Awe escapes with the waters of Loch Awe to join Loch Etive and the open sea. The river has cut a deep gorge between the mountains whose sides rise up at so steep an angle, that to the south there is a giant scree and to the north, a perpendicular cliff of metamorphic rock.

In order to carry a metalled road and a railway track through the pass, it had been necessary to blast away the side of Ben Cruachan with dynamite. The resulting shelf, just wide enough to accommodate the two, side by side, stood some hundred feet above the river below, and some five hundred feet below the top of the man-made cliff.

High on the side of Ben Cruachan, above the Pass of Brander, stood a solitary oak tree, perhaps a hundred years old.

Once, it had been a part of an ancient wood, companionably residing amongst fellow oaks, sycamores, and coppices of willow and alder. Perhaps by accident, or perhaps because of the conscience of some engineer, despairing of the devastation he had already caused in this beautiful place, the oak tree had escaped destruction when its sister trees were carried away by the roadworks. The tree's roots half out of the soil, were whitened by summer sunshine, and its branches hung with a silver filigree of lichens. No longer protected by the surrounding woodland, these epiphytes were dying from constant exposure to wind and rain, ice and snow. The soil at the base of the tree, loosened by the climatic conditions, had been washed out to form a convenient shelter for sheep, stranded on the mountainside. The animals, by their movement, further disturbed the roots, although by trampling the soil they may have helped to stabilise the tree for a time.

Here, high in the mountains, the rain had hardly ceased for forty-eight hours. Rivers, swollen and overflowing, poured downward with such force that any loose material was carried with them. Rocks and boulders, building up in the stream beds, produced miniature dams which diverted the streams, sending them through softer soil which was, in turn, lifted and carried forwards.

One such stream had found its way to the base of the tree, washing away the remaining soil to which the live roots still clung.

Suddenly, with a tearing sound which was lost in the howling of the gale, the tree toppled forwards over the abyss. There it hovered for a time, lurching drunkenly in the wind. Then it fell, uninterrupted, on to the railway track five hundred feet below.

With a quantity of loose soil at its mercy, the newly directed stream surged forwards over the cliff, carrying rocks and boulders and a sea of liquid mud, down, down, to pile itself up over the waiting oak.

After the avalanche there came an eerie silence, broken only by the chug-chugging of the Glasgow train, plying its way up, out of the valley.

The rain had begun again and a thick mist rolled down the steep scree-slope on the opposite bank of the river. In an instant the view was reduced to a few yards on either side of the track.

Driver Neil McQueen had applied gentle pressure to the brakes and allowed an escape of steam to reduce his speed at the very moment of losing visibility. When his fireman leaned forward with another shovel of coal, he stayed his hand.

'Leave it for the moment, Thomas,' he instructed. 'We'll no' be breaking any records on this run!'

Both men were straining their eyes, peering into the fog up ahead. Nevertheless, both were overwhelmed by the speed at which the huge obstacle reared up in their path.

Neil scarcely had time to blow a warning whistle and apply the handbrake before the locomotive plunged into the mass of rock, mud and branches, and lurched to a halt.

The carriages immediately behind the engine twisted on their couplings, so that the first two hovered uncertainly, poised between the steep side of the cliff and the turbulent river below. The two remaining carriages, and the guard's van, had plunged down the bank. The guard's van, with its buffers already submerged in the torrent, was in danger of being carried away at any moment.

For a long time, the only sound was that of discharging steam. Then a cry was heard from somewhere near the front of the train; this was quickly taken up by further shouts for help as passengers recovered consciousness or merely overcame the sudden shock of the impact.

All the time the rain continued to fall, and all the time the level of the water in the river below continued to rise.

Tommy, the fireman, had been thrown backwards in the collision, and had hit his head on the iron side of the coal tender. He lay with his arms thrown wide, as though to take the impact of the fall. His eyes were closed, and his mouth hung open, revealing a row of rotted teeth, stained yellow with nicotine. For a long time, so it seemed, Neil's hands froze on the lever, but as the sound of his friend's moaning began to penetrate, he recovered his shocked senses and went to the aid of his fireman. He attempted to lift Tommy's head, but seeing the gush of blood from a deep wound just above the ear, lowered the man again, very gently. Using a somewhat grubby neckcloth, Neil bandaged his friend's head to staunch the blood. Finally, taking off his jacket, he covered the still form to keep out the cold and wet.

He climbed stiffly down from the cab, and made his way back along the track to inspect the damage.

Ian must have been unconscious for some seconds, for when he came to, he found the male passengers who had joined the

train at Taynuilt already attempting to open the door on the river side of the coach.

In his dazed condition, Ian observed the scene as if in a dream. The spick and span carriage they had entered on boarding the train, with its brocade seats, mirrors, and pictures of Highland scenery, was now a tangled mass of wreckage. Sharp slivers of glass sprang up from the upholstery, like pins in a giant pincushion. Netting from the luggage rack hung like curtains down the walls, and splintered timbers threatened to prove deadly to the trapped passengers, should the carriage move a second time.

Hand baggage had burst open on impact, scattering the contents everywhere. Angus Beaton's manuscript sprinkled the scene like oversized confetti. Even as he watched, Ian saw one sheet, then another, wafted out of the window, which was now devoid of glass.

Over everything there lay a film of whitish dust. In his semi-conscious state, Ian tried, unsuccessfully, to identify its source.

From the angle at which the coach was lying, it seemed clear that they were in danger of toppling over the cliff. Any movement might bring about the final alteration in that angle, which would send the carriage plunging into the turbulent river, below.

'Stop!' he shouted at the two men, bringing their panic-stricken bid for freedom to a halt.

Then, in a much calmer voice, Ian ordered them to back away, one foot at a time, over the unrecognisable debris which littered the floor, until they were on the roadway side of the carriage.

The woman, who was unconscious, lay across the seat, where she had landed after being thrown from one side of the carriage to the other. Her head lay among wreckage from the collapsed luggage rack. Her heavy portmanteau, which Angus had so obligingly placed there, out of the way, now lay across the doctor's chest, pinning him to the floor.

Ian reached across to feel for a pulse in his uncle's neck. Yes, it was there. He was alive.

He struggled to his feet and, mustering all his strength, lifted the portmanteau from his uncle's body. Thrusting it out of the way, he knelt down in the narrow gap between the seats and felt for an injury. The brief examination revealed that some of Angus's ribs were crushed. Even as the young man made this discovery, the doctor's breathing became more laboured. Ian knew enough to realise that unless his uncle received immediate treatment, he was likely to die from a punctured lung.

The two men were struggling now with the other door, which seemed to be stuck.

'See if you can let the window down,' advised Ian. 'And try to attract attention. It may be easier for someone to open it from the outside.'

The more excitable man, he of the tweed breeches, turned upon Ian. 'You're so full of your instructions,' he cried, 'do something to get us out!'

'You will achieve nothing by panicking,' he warned sharply. 'Get a hold upon yourself, man, there are people injured here. Now, do as I suggest. Let down the window and see if you can attract attention from outside.'

The man looked keenly at Ian for a few seconds, muttered in an embarrassed fashion to his companion, and then the two of them struggled with the window. At last it moved sufficiently for force to be applied from above. A sudden blast of cold air entered the carriage as the window gave way, and caused a through draught.

This had the immediate effect of bringing the injured woman back to consciousness. She moaned, opened her eyes and tried to sit up. With a scream of pain, she subsided and lay across the seat, whimpering softly like a wounded animal.

'Can't see a thing out here,' announced he of the knickerbockers. 'At this angle, the door is too heavy to push open from inside. I'll have to climb out. Here, Charlie, catch hold of my shirt, try to ease me down a little way.' The man placed first one, then the other foot over the sill, until he was in a sitting position on the sloping side of the coach. Then with his

companion controlling his descent, he scrambled unsteadily to a crouching position beside the door opening. He turned the handle and pulled upwards and outwards. After two more attempts, the heavy door came free and was swung back to clatter against the side of the coach.

Ian, meanwhile, had been examining the woman. Her injuries appeared to be all on the left side. Her leg was clearly fractured below the knee, for it hung over the edge of the seat in a most unnatural position. She must have been thrown against the wall on impact and then landed back on the seat on her face.

As the door was flung open, Tweed Breeches pulled himself back up until his head was level with the sill, and leaned into the carriage.

'I'd better get along to the guard's van,' he said. 'Make sure our stuff is all right.'

'Hey, just a moment,' Ian protested. 'I need a hand here, to get these people out.'

The second man, Charlie, turned round apologetically. 'Can't let Albert go and handle all that luggage by himself,' he said. 'But don't worry, I'll be back in a short while.'

Ian began to protest, but Charlie was gone.

There was nothing else for it, he would have to manage alone. In an effort to make the woman more comfortable, Ian grasped her beneath the shoulders and pulled her along the seat towards the now open door. Her scream of pain quickly died away as she fell into a deep faint. Working quickly to take advantage of her unconsciousness, he decided to immobilise the broken bones. Using two slats torn from the shattered wall of the carriage, and strips of linen from the antimacassars still clinging miraculously to the backs of the tattered seating, he fashioned a suitable splint. Setting the limb was less problematical than he had anticipated. The leg below the knee had been left dangling over the edge of the seat after the impact and the crenulated ends of bone had remained apart. It was a relatively simple matter therefore to bring them together before securing with the splint.

Without assistance, he could do no more for the woman. He turned his attention to his uncle.

Feeling carefully under the older man's shirt, he traced each rib back from the sternum until he encountered those which were distorted. Tearing up more of the linen cloths so thoughtfully provided by the West Highland Line, Ian produced a sufficient length of bandage to wrap several times around his uncle's torso. By applying downward force, the individual ribs were moved outwards and upwards at the sides, ensuring that any pressure upon the lungs lying below was eased.

Satisfied that his uncle was now relatively safe to be moved, Ian went to the open door and began to shout for assistance. There had been much toing and froing outside for some time, but engrossed as he was in his efforts to assist the injured, Ian had made no attempt to attract attention. He wondered vaguely what had become of his two companions. Surely they must have found someone by now who would come to his aid?

He shouted into the fog.

'Hullo! Anybody, hullo!'

It was as though he was alone in the world.

Then he heard a sharp knocking on the window of the next carriage. He clung precariously to the edge of the door and swung himself out so as to see into the window from which the sound had come.

A ghastly face, covered like his own in the strange white dust, stared out.

On catching sight of him, the trapped passenger waved wildly, indicating that Ian should open the door from the outside.

He had seen the difficulty his fellow travellers had experienced with this exercise and was not at all sure that he could summon the necessary strength to open the heavy door against the force of gravity.

He crawled on hands and knees, crabwise, across the sloping side of the carriage, until he was alongside the door.

'Can you hear me?' he yelled at the figure behind the glass.

The other passenger nodded his head so enthusiastically it seemed that previously he had given up all hope of being rescued from his prison.

'When I say push,' Ian shouted through the glass, 'put all your weight behind the door and try to force it upwards. Understand?'

The head within gave another vigorous nod. Ian pulled down the handle and held it there. On his shouted instruction, the trapped man pushed with all his weight and Ian hauled upwards with his. The effort seemed impossible. A searing pain shot across Ian's chest. He had great difficulty in catching his breath.

Seeing the problem from the inside, the other man took a few steps backwards, then charged the door. Ian, if unable to haul back, was at least able to hold the handle down. The lock gave and the door flew open, dislodging Ian and causing him to slide, unceremoniously, to the ground. He lay there on the gravel for some moments before his breathing returned to normal. The pain persisted, but after a time he thought he could manage to move and pulled himself to his feet.

The rescued passenger was effusive in his thanks. Coping with his pain, but uncomfortably aware that his two injured patients were still in grave danger, Ian brushed aside the thanks.

'There are two people seriously injured up there.' He indicated his own carriage. 'I must have help to lower them to the ground.'

'Let me go and see who I can find.' The offer was well meant, but Ian had no time for niceties. He could not afford to have this man go off into the fog, never to return.

'If you go now, it could be too late to save them,' he argued. 'This carriage is very unstable. If the carriages behind go over, there will be no chance of saving my people.'

'What do you want me to do?' His companion clearly understood the urgency in Ian's pleading.

'Give me a boost up,' he instructed. 'I will try to lower them down to you.'

When he finally climbed back into the carriage, the boy was forced to rest for a few moments. The fierce pain passed over him in waves, but after a few minutes it subsided to a numbing ache and he felt he could now complete his task.

The young woman had regained consciousness. Her pain had been eased somewhat by Ian's setting of the broken leg, but the extensive bruising had caused her body to stiffen.

He spoke to her encouragingly, needing her co-operation. 'My name is Ian Beaton, miss,' he began. 'As we are going to have to work together to get you out of here, would you mind telling me who you are?'

Her frightened eyes looked into his steady grey ones. His confidence filled her with hope that this ordeal would soon be over.

She watched him as he cleared the slivers of glass from the seat, ensuring that she would not be further injured during her extrication from the wreck.

'Thora,' she answered. 'Thora Campbell.'

'Well, Thora,' Ian held her hand gently, 'you are going to have to help me. Your leg is broken but I have set it and affixed a splint to prevent further movement. It will still be painful when you change position. I wish it were possible to lift you out of here on a stretcher, but there are only the two of us, so you will have to use your good leg to help us.'

'I will try,' she answered bravely, and attempted a smile.

When Ian began to ease her towards the door, she cried out in agony.

'Dig the heel of your good foot into the seating,' he urged her. 'Now, push hard.'

Supporting her shoulders against his chest he hauled her along the seat, all the time watching to see that the injured leg was not hampered by stray wreckage.

At last they reached the open door and Ian persuaded Thora to swing both legs to the floor so that she could leave the carriage, feet first.

With the young man holding her shoulders, and the other passenger, down below, guiding her sliding descent to the track, Thora was soon safely on the ground. Ian's companion helped her to a grassy bank where she could sit.

'Thank you, sir,' she sighed gratefully, happy to be on level ground and away from the ghastly scene in the carriage. 'May I know both my rescuers' names?'

'The other gentleman is a stranger to me, ma'am,' was the reply, 'but I am Andrew Bellamy, entrained for Glasgow and London. But perhaps not today,' he added jokingly, trying to lift her spirits.

'Now, if you will excuse me, I must go to the aid of my friend up above!'

Angus had hardly moved since Ian had strapped his ribs. His colour was poor and his breathing laboured.

The doctor had landed on the floor between the seats and rolled, so that he was partially wedged, by his lower trunk, beneath the seat. This in turn had collapsed and was pinning him down.

Ian began to clear a path through the debris to the door. The wretched portmanteau which had caused his uncle's injury must now be moved aside. Ian attempted to lift it, but his enfeebled efforts were in vain.

He tried again. The heavy baggage tilted on to one side then toppled over towards the river end of the carriage. With a sickening lurch, the whole coach moved by several degrees.

Ian froze.

There was the sound of scrabbling on the outside of the carriage, followed by a grunting and gasping as Andrew Bellamy hauled himself into it.

'For God's sake,' cried Ian harshly, 'take care. Can't you see she is on the move!'

'All the more reason to lend a hand,' replied Andrew, summing up the situation at a glance.

He eased himself forward cautiously, until he was able to grab the handles of the offending piece of luggage. Pulling it

behind him, he retreated towards the open door, and coaxed it over the sill.

The bag fell to the ground with a thud, burst open and scattered Thora's belongings all across the track.

'Well, that's that out of the way,' observed Andrew, with an air of great satisfaction. 'What next?'

Ian was so relieved to have someone there to help that he ignored the irritation aroused by the man's flippancy.

'My uncle is seriously injured in the chest,' he explained. 'He can give us little assistance.'

'Almost a dead weight, in fact,' came Andrew Bellamy's ill-timed jest.

Ian did not appreciate this kind of humour. If they did not get on with the task they might all be dead weights at any second, he reflected grimly.

'I will hold his shoulders,' he asserted, somewhat coldly. 'Perhaps you will be good enough to grasp hold of his legs? Together we might be able to lift him as far as the door.'

'Right you are, Doctor!' cried the other, and Ian looked up sharply to see if the jibe was intended. What an aggravating character the man was.

It was probably this surge of anger which gave Ian Beaton the strength to lift Angus and struggle as far as the door.

While he held on to his uncle, Andrew scrambled to the ground and lifted his arms to receive the injured man.

In the meantime, a small crowd of people had gathered around Miss Campbell, prominent amongst them Charlie and Albert, who, on discovering the precarious position of the guard's van, had decided against trying to retrieve their belongings. They had become engaged in assisting other passengers to alight from the train, and had only now returned to their own carriage.

Thora Campbell directed their attention to the drama taking place above their heads.

Instantly, there were willing arms reaching out to steady Angus Beaton on his passage to the ground. Once safely down, he was lifted gently to the side of the track and

covered with blankets, discovered, fortunately, amongst the scattered luggage.

It was some moments before Andrew became aware that Ian had not joined them. Having looked around for the irate young man, whom he had found to be so lacking in humour, he climbed back on to the side of the coach, which was now poised on a knife-edge and likely to go over at any instant.

He pulled himself into the carriage for a second time, and discovered Ian, collapsed on the floor. He had not moved from the position he held before his uncle's descent to safety.

'Are you all right, old chap?' Andrew demanded, a note of apprehension creeping into his voice.

He gripped Ian by the arm and shook him in an attempt to rouse him. When he released it, the hand flopped lifelessly to the floor.

'Oh, no!' moaned Bellamy. Then, over his shoulder, he called for help.

He said nothing of his fears to those who crawled up the side of the coach to assist in Ian's rescue. They thought he was unconscious . . . delayed shock . . . internal injury perhaps? But Andrew had known immediately. The brave young man was dead.

Twenty-five passengers and the guard lost their lives that day. Shortly after Ian's body was lifted from the train, the entire string of carriages broke away from the coal tender and plunged into the ravine, carrying with them all those still trapped in the wreckage.

Chapter 5

It was as though he floated upon a bed of thistledown. How could it support his weight? At any second he might drop right through. He felt himself clinging on, as though to the edge of some precipice from which, at any moment, he could roll over into oblivion.

There was light. It flashed into his consciousness and faded, leaving behind the warm darkness which threatened to engulf him finally.

From far away a familiar voice was calling him. He struggled to reach out towards the sound but his arms would not respond to the commands of his brain.

He attempted to open his eyes, but his eyelids remained leaden and immobile. He might have lapsed into unconsciousness once more had it not been for the insistence of that voice.

'Uncle Angus, please open your eyes. It is I, Margaret. Please, Uncle, try to wake up!'

She looked despairingly at her father.

He signalled his encouragement with a slight nod of the head.

'Just once more, Miss Beaton.' Michael Brown was studying her uncle's face intently as he searched for a feeble pulse. 'I believe I saw a flicker of response. Try to speak normally, as though you had just called in on a social visit.'

The young physician replaced his patient's arm beneath the covers, and moved to the window. David followed him.

'Has he been in a coma the whole time since the accident?' David enquired. 'Have there been no periods of lucidity at all?'

'None,' Michael responded. 'Your brother has not moved since he was brought here, three days ago. I have examined his skull for signs of fracture and can find nothing. His ribs are quite badly crushed, but your son's prompt action avoided any secondary damage in that quarter.'

'Then we are speaking of a haematoma, without any depression of the skull?' David concluded.

'So it would seem,' confirmed Dr Brown. 'I have shaved the head, and found no indication of hairline fracture, although discolouration indicates the site of the damage which is at the base of the skull. We can only hope that the bleeding has now stopped. His stable condition would indicate that this is so.'

'So, it is a case of waiting patiently for events to resolve themselves.' David resigned himself to the inevitable. So much of their work relied upon waiting for something to happen. How often had he been obliged to give this same advice to anxious relatives?

'. . . Mr Whylie sailed over to Bunessan on Monday, Uncle. Father was anxious that your servants should be aware of the accident, and that they should be making suitable preparations for your return. I would have gone with him, for you know how much I enjoy a visit to your beautiful home, but Papa suggested that we might visit you here, so of course I decided against the sail . . .' Margaret prattled on, all the time gazing anxiously into her uncle's face for some sign of recognition, some flicker of understanding.

She was suddenly aware of a firm, comforting hand on her shoulder.

She turned to find Dr Brown smiling down at her.

'You are doing splendidly, Miss Beaton. That is exactly what is required. A familiar voice, speaking about ordinary matters will often stir a patient into wakefulness. You must not overtire yourself, however. May I suggest that you take a rest now, and perhaps return after dinner for a short while?'

'Oh, but suppose he wakens when I am not here? He will be so confused in strange surroundings,' the girl protested.

'Do as Dr Brown suggests, my dear,' her father urged

her. 'I shall stay with Angus until you return. Take a good meal, and have a lie-down in your room.' Then, turning to Michael, 'Perhaps you will have the staff send up something for me from the kitchen?'

'Of course,' Michael agreed.

'But he is so near to waking now, Papa,' Margaret protested.

'You must conserve your own strength, Miss Margaret,' Michael Brown reiterated. 'It will be some time yet before your uncle regains consciousness.'

'Go along, my dear, do as Dr Brown suggests. I shall come for you when it is necessary.'

'Will you allow me to escort you to the dining-room, Miss Beaton?' Michael asked. 'If you have no objection, I shall join you in a small repast. I have other victims of the disaster to be visited in the village before I go home tonight.' He held the door wide for her to pass through.

Margaret was not unmoved by the attention paid to her by her father's colleague. In other circumstances she would have been flattered to be entertained thus by a gentleman. She had a faint memory of having met Michael Brown when she was about six or seven years old. There were two small children, she remembered, but she did not have any recollection of a Mrs Brown.

Seated in the dining-room of the Dalmally Inn, she found herself scrutinising his appearance while he wrestled with the

His hair was dark auburn, but greying slightly at the temples in a manner which Margaret considered very distinguished. His eyes were of a clear blue, wrinkled at the corners with lines more indicative of sorrow than laughter. Somehow this fact made her regard him even more sympathetically. He really was a very handsome man.

Margaret was so used to the company of her brothers and their friends that she felt perfectly at ease in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. She could attribute this self-confidence in large part to her mother's influence, for girls who

simpered and primped before the young men of the district were in Annabel's eyes beneath contempt. She had never encouraged the type of silly talk which permeated the drawing-rooms of those of her neighbours with daughters of their own.

Until now, Margaret had been unmoved by the attentions of the young men of her acquaintance. Michael Brown, however, stirred something deep inside the girl. Callow youth might have no chance of capturing Margaret's heart, but Michael, with his sophisticated manner and his handsome appearance, was altogether different. There was no aspect of the man that did not appeal to her.

'I would recommend the fish, Miss Beaton,' he suggested.

Had her father made such a suggestion, she would in all probability have exclaimed that she hated fish, and chosen something far less bland.

'Thank you,' she replied demurely, 'I am happy to be guided by you, Dr Brown.'

'Some creamed potatoes to go with the fish, and a little custard pudding to follow?'

She noticed how, when he asked a question, one eyebrow rose just a little higher than the other. It was really quite comical, but most endearing.

Smiling, she answered, 'I am sure that will do splendidly, Doctor, thank you.'

Michael gave their order to the waiter and drank a little from his glass of white wine. Margaret, who normally tasted wine only at parties and at Christmas, was thrilled to have been consulted about the origin and the year before Michael had ordered a bottle.

She took a sip of the sharp, astringent drink, blinked to prevent the tears which sprang to her eyes and managed to suppress a cough as the smooth amber liquid slipped down her throat. She had expected it to taste sweet.

After a few moments she felt a warm glow suffusing her blood. The wine was really very pleasant, once one was prepared for the slight tartness. She smiled at him as she stood her glass back on the table.

'Not too dry for you, I hope,' he enquired anxiously.

'Quite delicious,' she replied, beginning to believe it. 'Have you practised in Dalmally for a very long time, Dr Brown?'

'Ever since I graduated from Medical College,' he replied. 'My late wife and I settled here soon after our wedding. I was one of the first beneficiaries of the Marquis of Stirling's bursaries, provided for the children of his estate workers. Your father was instrumental in getting the grant, for which I shall be eternally grateful. Major Lovat and Mrs McIntyre were obliged to work especially hard, to see that I was up to entry standard.'

'I find that hard to believe,' she protested. 'Papa always speaks very highly of your abilities. He used to hold you up as an example when either Hugh or Ian were inept at their tasks. They both followed in your shoes, you know, as his apprentice.'

But mention of her brother Ian dispelled the brief period of enjoyment. She felt guilty for having forgotten, if only momentarily, the reason why she and her father were here in Dalmally.

Michael leaned forward and grasped her hand across the table.

'It is no use my telling you not to grieve for your brother,' he said. 'It will be a long time, if ever, before you will be able to accept his loss, but it must be some comfort to you to know that his actions were responsible for saving others in the tragedy, not least your uncle.'

'But he was so young.' She was trembling. His grip became firmer. 'I know that Uncle Angus would have wished to die rather than have Ian sacrifice himself in that way.'

'Perhaps Ian, knowing as I suspect he did that he had a very short time to live, was pleased to use up the little he had left in helping others?'

Margaret was staring at him, uncomprehending.

'You mean he knew that his condition was terminal, all the time?' Her voice was so indistinct that he had to strain to hear her.

'Undoubtedly,' Michael replied. 'Your brother was too well versed in medical matters, despite his youth, not to have studied his own condition. Besides, your father admitted to me that he and Ian had discussed his situation on occasion, and had agreed that the best course was for the boy to carry on as though there was nothing wrong. I believe that he led a full and active life. At least he was not confined to an invalid's couch.'

Margaret pictured the pale little boy with blue shadows around his lips, the lanky youth who always came last in races, and the quiet, thoughtful young man, who in the last two years had taken to walking alone in the hills, and sailing in his little dinghy. Had she known how bravely he went about his life, perhaps she would have felt more charitably towards him. Instead, she had been aggrieved that, younger than herself, he had been given all the benefits of a good education which she had been denied. True, she had been allowed to sit in on some of his lessons with Aunt Elizabeth, but William Whylie had excluded her from the mathematics and astronomy classes at her father's strict instruction. What nonsense to suggest that she would overtax her brain by studying alongside her brother! Really, for one who considered himself at the forefront of medical science, her father could be extraordinarily reactionary.

They finished their meal in silence.

Michael, believing his charming companion to be absorbed in grief and her concern for the poor man lying upstairs in a coma, made no attempt to continue the conversation.

Margaret, miserably contemplating her failings, struggled to find something in her actions in the recent past which would have indicated to her younger brother that she had never ceased to love him. For despite her envy she *had* loved him, and had dreaded the thought of his going away. Oh, how she wished she could have those last few years back to relive in the knowledge of what was to come!

'I must be on my way,' Michael announced, bringing her self-recriminations to an abrupt end. 'I urge you to take a

little rest before returning to the sickroom. Dr Beaton was most specific that he would remain with your uncle for an hour or two at least.'

He signalled the waiter, settled the bill and rose to leave.

'No doubt I shall see you tomorrow, Miss Beaton? I shall be looking in on your uncle late tonight, and in the morning.'

'Thank you, Dr Brown,' she answered. 'You have been very kind . . . and understanding. I shall look forward to your next visit.'

She climbed the stairs almost in a trance as opposing thoughts and images battled for her attention.

In the impersonal little bedroom which she had been allocated, she took off her gown and lay on the bed in her petticoat. She would rest for an hour, and then go to relieve her father.

Her troubled thoughts disturbed her for moments only, the pain and grief of the last few days finally submerged in an unconscious jumble of dreams. Soon even these disintegrated, leaving her sleeping peacefully and deeply.

She awoke with a start.

It took her a few moments to remember where she was. The room was unfamiliar. She had fallen asleep in daylight and it was now pitch black. A faint grey glimmer indicated the location of the single window in the room. By this minimal illumination she was able to distinguish a candle on the night stand beside her. Sitting up on the bed she searched for and found a packet of lucifers.

By the feeble light of the candle she was able to examine her fob watch, still attached to the bodice of her discarded gown.

'Three o'clock,' she muttered. Then, as the full import of the time came to her, 'Three o'clock in the morning!' She had promised Papa she would relieve him after an hour. She had been asleep for seven.

Hastily she drew on her dress, glanced briefly in the mirror on the dressing table, and let herself out into the corridor, closing the door silently behind her.

There was a light under the door of her uncle's room. Cautiously she turned the handle, and looked in.

Angus lay as she had left him, on his back, his mouth slightly open, his eyes tight shut. There was no sign that he had moved any part of his body. For a moment she thought he might be dead, then the coverlet rose and fell, almost imperceptibly, and she gave a sigh of relief.

Beside him, sprawled in an uncomfortable, straight-backed chair, her father dozed. The book he had been reading had slipped to the floor. His spectacles were perched precariously on the end of his nose, and likely to fall at any moment.

Glancing from one brother to the other, Margaret marvelled, not for the first time, how it was that two men should appear so alike physically, and harbour such diverse interests and aims.

Her father, a splendid physician and a great seeker after truth, was nevertheless in many respects living in the past, whereas Uncle Angus, never happier than when his head was buried in some ancient Gaelic manuscript, understood entirely her own aspirations, and those of women such as Aunt Elizabeth and even her own mother, to find a proper place for their talents in a world dominated by men.

As she watched him, David's mouth fell open and the huge snore which this invoked woke him in an instant.

'What?' he gasped, then seeing her standing there, 'Margaret, what are you doing here?'

'It is three o'clock, Papa,' she told him. 'I am come to sit with Uncle while you get some proper rest.'

Then, when he made to protest, 'You may take my bed,' she told him, placing the key to her hotel room in his hand. 'It is number eight, at the far end of the corridor.'

'But what about you?' he protested feebly.

'I have had a wonderful sleep, Papa,' she argued. 'Now I am going to sit with Uncle Angus until morning.'

Her tone reminded David of his wife in one of her rare domineering moods. He obeyed Margaret's order without further question.

When he had gone, she turned her attention to Angus. The disturbance seemed to have brought a certain change to the patient's appearance. There was more expression about the mouth, the lips seemed to tremble a little. One hand moved almost imperceptibly on the counterpane.

'Uncle.' She spoke quietly, finding it difficult to suppress her excitement. 'Uncle, open your eyes. It is I, Margaret. Please speak to me.'

She caught hold of his hand and was instantly rewarded with a slight squeeze of her fingers.

Stroking the back of the hand as she had learned to do for poor Major Lovat, the girl spoke soothingly.

'Uncle Angus, you have been lying there for far too long. It is time for you to open your eyes and wake up.'

To her astonishment, that was precisely what he did. The eyelids fluttered a little, then they rose slowly, against their will it seemed, and she found herself looking into his eyes. The pupils, enlarged by drugs, made them look darker than she knew them to be, but there was no question that her uncle had responded to her command.

'Wa . . . water . . .' he whispered.

Not knowing what she should or should not do in this event, she chose to ignore his plea for the moment.

'Oh, Uncle,' she cried, 'you have been so long away from us. I thought you might never come back!'

'Where . . . ?'

'You are at an inn in Dalmally . . . after the train crash. Do you remember?'

'Ian . . . is he all right?'

'Later, Uncle,' she stopped him. 'When you are feeling a little better.' She smiled reassuringly at him, then let go of his hand.

'Just you wait here,' she said, realising instantly what a stupid thing she had said. As if the poor man could do anything but stay there!

'I am just going to call Papa.'

She reached the door and looked back. His eyes had followed

her, he was staring after her as though disbelieving her intention to return. 'Just a few minutes,' she promised, and closed the door softly behind her.

David had been asleep such a short time it was a pity to wake him. For a moment, she wondered if she should just go back and sit with her uncle until dawn. Then she remembered her father's instructions to fetch him immediately there was any sign of a change. It could be important to summon him directly, she thought, and knocked loudly on the door of number eight before going in.

There was no response.

She already had the door handle within her grasp when a slight sound from the far end of the darkened corridor startled her. From out of the shadows Michael spoke.

'What is it?'

'Uncle Angus is conscious. He spoke to me a few moments ago. I did not know what to do. Papa has only just gone to bed.'

Michael closed the door of another patient's room, from which he had just emerged. 'Let me have a look at him.' He took her gently by the arm, and led her back to her uncle's room.

Angus Beaton was fully conscious now. He turned his head when they came in, and his face lit up at the sight of Margaret. He had convinced himself that he had been dreaming it was she who had spoken to him.

Michael carried out his examination, and declared his patient to be out of danger. When Angus began to ask questions about the accident, however, he silenced him abruptly.

'Enough talk for tonight, Dr Beaton,' he said sternly. 'A drink of water, to remove the dryness in your throat, then a sedative to ensure that you sleep for a few hours. Talk can come later.'

Margaret was delighted to see that her uncle was ready to argue with the younger man. As he opened his mouth to protest, she placed her hand over his lips.

'Now, Uncle,' she remonstrated, 'you of all people should know that you must do as the doctor orders!'

He smiled up at her, swallowed the draught which Michael held to his lips, and laid back on the pillows. The effort had quite exhausted him.

Michael was packing his equipment away.

'Your uncle will sleep for several hours, Miss Margaret. There is really no necessity for you to stay here.'

'Papa has taken my room,' she explained, smiling. 'I do not wish to disturb him now. I will be quite comfortable here for the rest of the night. It will soon be dawn.'

She moved to the window and pulled back the heavy drapes.

There was already a brightness in the sky. The clouds which had enveloped the mountains for a week or more had lifted now, so that the peak of Ben Cruachan was sharply silhouetted against the skyline.

Even as they watched, the sun appeared over the eastern horizon to bathe the harsh peaks in a warm, ruddy glow. The light crept down the valley, bringing into view a broad river which swept round in a great curve as it approached the village. The rains of the past week had created a spate of foaming white water which gouged its way through banks of green moss and ferns and beneath stunted willows, permanently bowing in obeisance to the prevailing winds.

Margaret was fascinated by the scene, so different from the wild coastline of Seileach.

'This is a beautiful place,' she murmured. 'But do you not find the hills oppressive?'

She glanced up at the great peak of the Ben, towering above the village, and shuddered at the thought of how the mountain had devastated her family.

'I could never live in this place,' she declared, 'for every time I looked up there, I would be reminded of the awful thing that occurred here.'

Michael suffered a sudden jolt. He had already begun to cherish a very special feeling for this lovely, intelligent girl. Vague ideas filtered through his mind of seeking some

alternative employment, for he had, by now, convinced himself that their futures lay together.

Three days later Michael declared that Angus was fit enough to be moved.

The railway had been cleared of all evidence of the crash, and since this was the quickest and most comfortable way to travel, David decided to use it, despite Margaret's obvious qualms.

Not only Angus was to journey home to Seileach with them. Ian's coffin had been standing in the little Kirk of St Conan, beside Loch Awe, awaiting arrangements for the funeral.

The story of the young man who had saved the lives of several passengers on the doomed train had been reported in the newspapers. Ian had become the hero of the disaster. Out of respect for his brave actions, the good villagers of Lochawe were there to lift his remains into the guard's van when the locomotive drew into the wayside station.

The simple ceremony was performed with Margaret and David standing by.

Moved by the kindness of these strangers, David went over to them to thank them. Margaret, suddenly overwhelmed by the stark reality that it was her brother's corpse lying in this coffin, wept silently.

While Angus was recovering from his injuries at the inn in Dalmally, David had had time to make arrangements for his boy's funeral.

To avoid any further delay, he wrote to William begging his friend to contrive to meet the steamer on the appointed day, and convey the coffin straight to the kirk. He had settled on the short sea route from Oban in order to save Angus the arduous drive over rutted roads to Seileach.

It was with heavy hearts that the little party waited to disembark at Eisdalsa pier, but they were buoyed up by the large crowd of quarrymen and their families who had gathered to welcome them home.

There was no shortage of willing hands to lift the coffin

and carry it the two miles to the church. As the funeral cortege passed Tigh na Broch, Hugh and Stuart, called from their studies in Edinburgh, fell in step beside their father for the long walk up the brae.

Margaret remained at the pier with Angus, to see him safely installed in the Beaton chaise. Together they drove home to Tigh na Broch.

Daisy greeted them on their arrival. Of Annabel there was no sign.

'Has Mama gone to the kirk, Daisy?' Margaret enquired anxiously. Her mother was really not well enough to attend the service.

'No, Miss, she is still in her room. Hasn't left her bed since you and the doctor went away. Mrs McIntyre is with her, Miss. I don't know what I would have done without her kindness. Mrs Beaton is that distraught.'

On David's written instructions, Daisy had made up a bed for the invalid in his study.

It took a matter of minutes to get her uncle settled comfortably. Margaret was reminded of another invalid who had occupied this same place so many years ago. Her memories of Major Lovat had faded somewhat, but the sight of her uncle lying there on the couch recalled those long afternoons when she had so painstakingly helped the Major to regain his speech.

'Oh, Margaret, I am so glad you are back.' Elizabeth advanced into the room and threw her arms about the girl. They hugged each other wordlessly for a few minutes, until Elizabeth, suddenly aware that they were not alone, turned to the figure on the couch.

'Why, Angus,' she cried. 'How well you look. They told us you were at death's door!'

She clamped her hand over her mouth. What a stupid thing to have said.

Margaret smiled sympathetically. She too had found it difficult to avoid such faux pas ever since the accident. Perhaps it was always like this when someone died?

'How is Annabel?' Angus asked, acknowledging Elizabeth's greeting.

'She is very low indeed. To tell you the truth, I had it in mind to send for a doctor from Oban, had David not been coming back today.'

'I will go up to her now,' said Margaret. 'Would you like some tea, Uncle? I will ask Daisy to prepare it directly.'

The door to Annabel's room stood slightly ajar. From within came a sound of keening, that primitive lament whose meaning is universal.

Margaret hesitated for a moment before going in. Then, summoning her courage, she opened the door wide and confronted her mother.

'Mama,' she said, more cheerfully than she felt, 'we are home. Uncle Angus is downstairs and the others are away to the kirk. What a crowd there was to greet us at the pier! Ian would have been proud to think he was so well regarded.'

When, however, Margaret saw the pathetic figure of her mother, her dress in disarray, hair unkempt, face swollen with weeping, all her resolution to put on a brave face dissolved. She ran forward, fell on her knees, and buried her head in Annabel's lap as though she were a child.

Together they sobbed out their grief until, finally, it was Annabel who reached for a fresh handkerchief, and solemnly began to wipe the tears from her daughter's face.

'Oh, Mama, how shall we bear it?' Margaret pleaded, the anxious nights and the long journey taking their toll at last.

'Shsh, dear.' Annabel stroked the soft tresses absently, as though soothing a fretful child. Thus they stayed until the sound of heavy footsteps on the path, and the murmur of masculine voices, heralded the return of the mourners.

Under Elizabeth's direction, Daisy had laid out refreshments in the dining-room. Soon the house was filled with a buzz of conversation, quiet at first, and then as the whisky flowed, noisier and more cheerful. For this was the nature of a Highland funeral. Once the coffin was in the ground, the

wake became a celebration of the life that was gone.

There was nothing discreditable about Ian's life. He had hurt no one. His contact with the villagers had been nothing but agreeable, and at the last he had died helping others.

Memories of the deceased were recalled, youthful pranks, childish indiscretions, all those means by which a man is known to his fellows. Soon the conversation was punctuated by laughter, and by the time that the last of the visitors had departed, they had quite dispelled the raw grief of the past week.

Each member of the family was to experience moments when a look, or a word, would bring Ian sharply into focus, and then they would feel a deep sorrow, but the open wound of the violent bereavement would heal eventually.

Margaret's distress proved to be the spur which finally brought Annabel back to reality. A process which Elizabeth, by her patience and forthright practicality, had tried to initiate. Having already passed through the dark valley upon the death of her son, Annabel now recalled Elizabeth's own fortitude in similar circumstances, and took courage from the memory.

'We all have to carry on, my dear,' Elizabeth had told her. 'For the sake of those who are left. Your family need you to be strong, Margaret in particular.'

So eventually Annabel gathered up the reins of responsibility once more, assuaging her unhappiness with hard physical labour which sent her to bed each night exhausted.

Hugh and Stuart remained at Tigh na Broch until the end of the week, by which time a degree of normality had begun to be restored to all their lives.

David drove them to the pier on Saturday morning. There was no more talk of the train being the only way to travel.

'You know, Pa,' Hugh observed, as they waited for the signal to go aboard, 'we always knew that the kid was not as strong as the rest of us, but there was never any suggestion that he might be snuffed out, just like that.'

'Fine doctors we make,' observed Stuart, 'not to spot a problem as serious as that.'

David remained silent.

Stuart, suddenly aware, said, 'You knew? All the time, you knew he would never make old bones.'

'Yes.'

'Did he know too?' Hugh asked, searching his father's face for confirmation.

'Towards the end, yes.'

Stuart looked from Hugh to his father, nodded slightly and sighed. 'Poor old kid.'

Each shook his father warmly by the hand and started up the gangplank.

'Thank God they understand,' said David to himself as he swung up into the chaise and turned the horse in the direction of home. 'If only Annabel might be so easily persuaded.'

Angus recovered quickly from the effects of the haematoma, but his ribs were reluctant to heal and a certain amount of fluid, collected in his pleural cavity, was slow to clear.

As days turned to weeks, however, he became restless, and anxious to return to his own home.

'I cannot let you go off alone,' declared David. 'You need someone to look after you, and keep an eye on things. I would not trust you to seek help when you most needed it!'

'Then let Margaret come with me as my nurse,' Angus suggested. 'You know how she loves the old library. It would make a change and a rest for her. After all, there are staff aplenty to do the housework. The poor child is looking decidedly peaky, it would do her good.'

Had he overdone it? he wondered. Margaret had already confessed how she longed to get down to her writing again. The atmosphere at his house was so much more conducive to work than here at Tigh na Broch where everything centred upon the medical practice. With such a sparse population on the southern coast of the Island of Mull, Angus had very few calls upon his medical skills. While he was content to exercise his professional expertise from time to time, he was far happier with his books and manuscripts. It was the replacement of the

documents lost in the train crash which concerned him the most. His pamphlet was due for publication, and a large part of it must now be re-written. Without his notes to help him he could do nothing, and his notes were at home.

'I suppose that Margaret could manage,' David conceded, remembering the manner in which she had nursed her uncle in those early days, following the accident. Angus's recovery owed as much to her perseverance as to Michael Brown's competence. Which reminded him . . .

'Very well, Angus,' he said, anxious to get on with the letter that he had promised to write. 'If Annabel agrees, Margaret shall accompany you.'

'It will be very quiet here without you, Angus,' Annabel sighed. 'With Margaret gone too, we shall rattle around in this big house like two peas in a pod.'

'It's what you both need, Annabel. Time together, on your own. There is still much to resolve.'

How perceptive he was. So often, Annabel had wished that her husband had been possessed of the same insight into human nature as his brother. It seemed that all through her married life, Angus had been the one to point her in the right direction when there was a difficulty in her relationship with David.

'How are you now, Annabel?' he asked. 'In yourself, I mean.'

'Oh . . . you know . . . managing,' she answered lamely.

'What does that mean, exactly?'

'The way Ian died . . .' she said. 'It was so unnecessary. He should never have gone away to college.'

'You blame David for that?' Angus regarded her intently.

'In a way, I suppose I do. But I blame myself more. I knew, you see. I knew how tenuous was his hold on life, and yet I let him go.' She looked at him despairingly. 'David tried to keep it from me, but I found out.'

'Are you angry with him for not telling you the truth about Ian?' Angus demanded. 'He had his reasons, you know.'

'If I had known much earlier, when he was a little boy, I might have stopped him injuring himself further, protected him more, prevented this awful thing that happened to him.'

'Made him into an invalid you mean?'

'No, of course not,' she protested. 'Just . . . taken more care of him, that is all. He would have every right to accuse us of allowing him to die.'

Angus was shocked by her vehemence.

'Do you remember the day I took him fishing on the loch, and you went missing on Ben Buie?'

She nodded, recalling her terror, lost and alone on the mountain.

'Ian nearly died that day. Out there on the loch, I had to fight for his life. When he recovered, he wasn't frightened. All he could think about was the fish he had caught, and whether the other boys would believe that it could possibly be that big.'

'What are you saying, Angus?' she demanded anxiously.

'I suppose what I am trying to tell you is that Ian, even when he was that age . . . what was he, four or five years old? . . . knew instinctively that he had to use every second of his life and enjoy it to the full, because it was going to be so short.'

'But are you sure? What proof do you have of this?' She was unconvinced.

'Angus is right.'

Neither of them had noticed David who had entered the study by way of the surgery and had overheard much of their conversation.

'Ian knew his condition was terminal,' he told them. 'We spoke of it . . . only once. He thanked me for letting him live, Annabel,' he added on a note of resentment. 'Ian would never accuse us of allowing him to die.'

'He was my son!' she screamed at him, all self-control gone. 'You should have told me yourself, not let me find out from some stranger in Glasgow that my son was going to die.'

David was startled.

To his unspoken question she supplied the answer.

'You gave me the name of a heart specialist in Glasgow,

do you remember? Ian was fretful after Stuart left us to go on to the school, so I called in your man to attend him. It took him five minutes to make his diagnosis, confirming what you already knew to be the case!'

'But since you have known the truth all this while,' David demanded, 'why are you so angry now?'

'I am angry because you excluded me. As in every important matter, you assumed what my reaction would be and did not trust me to behave in the manner which was best for the boy. Why should I not be angry that you show so little faith in my ability to face up to reality!'

She made to pass him but he caught her in his arms and held her tight. For a moment she struggled to free herself, but at last she succumbed to his superior strength and went limp in his grasp. She began crying, great, heart-rending, choking sobs. Wordlessly, he held her, encouraging her to let it all out, the anger, the anguish, the sense of loss. At last her weeping subsided and he kissed her on the brow, on either cheek, and then on the mouth, hard and long. She clung to him as though she could never let him go.

They were quite unaware of Angus sidling out, muttering something about packing.

Annabel, freed from the suppressed emotions of the past weeks, felt strangely at peace in the refuge of her husband's arms. They no longer needed to mourn alone, and time was free to do its healing, unhindered.

When Angus and Margaret had been gone only a few days, a message was delivered at Tigh na Broch, by special courier. Daisy came in bearing the important-looking letter while David and Annabel were still seated companionably at the breakfast table.

Wiping his fingers to remove some marmalade, the doctor used his butter knife to open the envelope which, he noted with some satisfaction, was impressively embossed with the seal of the Marquis of Stirling.

* * *

To Dr David Beaton
Tigh na Broch
Eisdalsa
Argyll
Stirling Estates
Aberfeldy

21 October 1899

My Dear Old Friend,

Such tragic news.

What words can a man use, to comfort the bereaved parents of a beloved child? How much my heart aches for you, and your dear wife, for I am not without experience in these matters as you well know.

It may be some comfort to hear that a number of passengers on that ill-fated train owe their lives to the actions of your boy. Among them is my niece, Thora Campbell.

She has urged me to make some tangible recognition of your son's brave actions, which were taken, as we are all now well aware, in the full knowledge that he was jeopardising his own safety.

My long absence from these shores has left me ignorant of many affairs which would normally be my concern. Among them was your need for an isolation hospital. I have read copies of your correspondence with the authorities, and have pleasure in agreeing to provide the initial capital required to renovate the church building at Ballachuan, as you suggest The authorities in turn agree to maintain the buildings in perpetuity.

I trust that you will do me the honour of accepting this grant, as a token of esteem for the brave action of your late son, and I would take it kindly if you would allow us to name it the Ian Beaton Memorial Hospital.

As the result of your son's intervention, my niece's injured leg is on the mend. I trust that your brother is recovering as satisfactorily.

Please accept these, my sincere condolences.

George,
Marquis of Stirling

David found the kindness too much to bear. His eyes filled with tears as he handed the letter to Annabel. He rose hurriedly from the table and, blowing his nose loudly, made for his private sanctum.

Chapter 6

The small boy who stood in front of Katherine Logie was not only dirty, he looked positively ill. She had called him to the front because of his inattention. Now she regretted the harshness of her summons.

'Come round here, Rabbie,' she coaxed him, seeing his look of fear. It was not difficult to recognise a child accustomed to frequent beatings.

She held out her hand and he came, reluctantly, to stand beside her chair.

She placed a cool hand on his forehead. The child had a raging temperature. His skin was dry, his eyes bright with fever.

Although it was now mid-winter, Rabbie's only garments were a thin smock and a pair of ragged trousers cut down from a much larger pair. His feet were bare, and he had worn no topcoat to school. A filthy piece of cotton was carelessly bound around one knee.

'What's this, Rabbie?' she enquired gently.

'Bandage, Miss,' was the laconic reply.

'Who did that for you?'

'Did it myself.' The child was clearly not inclined to give anything away.

'Is it bad?' Katherine persisted. 'Will you let me take a look?'

The child allowed her to sit him on her desk while she cautiously unwound the bandage.

The wound must have been the normal gravel scrape that every small boy inevitably acquires. This one however, probably because it had not been washed, was a suppurating mess of flesh and pus.

Katherine recoiled in disgust both at the sight of the wound, and the unpleasant smell which emanated from it.

'Just sit there, Rabbie,' she instructed. Turning to some of the older children she asked, 'Is anyone's family expecting a visit from Dr Beaton today?'

The children looked enquiringly at one another, and then a small girl in the front row raised her hand.

'Please, Miss,' she said importantly, 'my granny is sick, and my mummy said she was going to get the doctor to her, Miss.'

'Good. Well then, Nancy, will you run home straight away, please, and ask your mother if she will tell the doctor, when he comes, that he is needed in the school?'

'Yes, miss.' Nancy got up from her seat with an air of gravity and fetched her coat. A number of envious glances followed her out of the room. It was not often that anyone was given such a good excuse to escape from lessons.

Meanwhile, Katherine lifted Robert Downie from his perch and sat him on a chair in the corner of the room near the fire.

Having sent one of the boys for a bowl of water, and one of the girls for her own rather inadequate medical kit, she proceeded to wash and dress the angry-looking wound. Finally she bound it again, using a strip of clean linen.

At last she was satisfied that she had done everything she could for the child.

'Now you just stay there, Rabbie, until the doctor comes,' she told him. The look of fear returned.

'I dinna ken what my ma'll say,' the boy protested tremulously. 'She never calls the doctor. She says we can't afford doctors and stuff.'

'That's all right.' Katherine smiled at him, comfortingly. 'Your mother will not have to pay.'

When David at last appeared it was midday and Katherine was able to dismiss the class for the break.

Before introducing him to Robert, she led the doctor to the far end of the room where they could not be overheard.

'Thank you for coming, Dr Beaton,' she began. 'I know this is not a usual way to call upon your services, but I have become more and more concerned about this particular family lately. The children look undernourished, they are very poorly clothed in this harsh weather, and now, today, Wee Rabbie has a festering wound on his knee which clearly has had no attention from his mother. I have washed it myself, and re-bandaged it this morning, but I think you should see it.'

'Rabbie is not the only child in the family, you say?' David queried, brushing aside her apologies.

'There are two elder sisters and a brother, Donald, who rarely attends school now. I am sure that he has some form of employment. He is nearly thirteen, so I have not pursued the matter too closely. The parents obviously need every penny the child can earn.'

'I'll take a look at Rabbie here. Will you please go and find his sisters and bring them in? Perhaps they all require my attentions.'

When Katherine turned to go, he called her back.

'You were quite right to call me, Miss Logie. It is a good thing that you are here to look out for your pupils' welfare.'

The School Board met regularly three times a year.

For several of the members it was a convenient occasion to meet old friends, catch up on local gossip and make arrangements for the various social events which helped the parishioners to pass the dreary winter months.

There were those, however, who brought to these meetings a sense of urgency and responsibility which set the attitudes of the rest in a very poor light.

Elizabeth had viewed the present meeting without enthusiasm. She knew that she would be introducing the same topics which she had raised time and again. She anticipated an adverse response from the majority of the committee, and knew that despite support from those whose opinion she valued the most, no decision of any moment would be made. It had been like this for several years now. The affluent times,

when the Quarry Company was prepared to dig deep into its pockets to find funds for building repairs, replacement furniture, new books, even pencils and pens, were long past. The lean years were upon them once more, and this time there seemed no hope at all that some miraculous order for slate was about to bring a fresh wave of prosperity.

Elizabeth concluded her report on the schools' progress in the past months.

'In the Seileach school there are now fifty pupils, and on the island of Eisdalsa forty. Of these, twelve children are in excess of ten years and I must tell the Committee that both Miss Logie and I are having great difficulty in insisting upon regular attendance by pupils of this age. There is a growing number of families obliged to put their older children out to work, if only for a few days each week, in order to make ends meet. I would be grateful if members of the Board could make any suggestions as to how this particular problem is to be overcome. As you know, we are without an attendance officer for the parish. My colleagues and I have very little time in which to pursue offending parents, so the question of upholding the law in ensuring that every child under the age of eleven years attends school full-time is really in your hands.'

She sat down to an embarrassed silence. Throats were cleared here and there, someone coughed. All were uncomfortably aware that the schoolmistress had put them on the spot.

A number of members of the Board were employers of local labour. They were the same people who employed the children, at very low wages, to do work which should rightly be given to their parents.

'Would you have us sack these children then?' blustered the red-faced Sir Henry Munro of Ballachuan.

'As Mrs McIntyre has pointed out,' William Whylie quickly intervened, 'it is up to us, not her, to solve this problem. By dispensing with adult labour and taking on young children to do their work, we are destroying the economy of the district. What is more, no one can suggest that these children are

capable of the amount of work their fathers can do, so it is in only a limited way that an employer can claim to be running his business efficiently with child labour.'

'Grown men would not thank you for offering them employment lifting potatoes and gleaning the cornfields,' protested Munro.

'Maybe not,' retorted William, 'but there are plenty of women glad of a job retting flax, and men labouring in the quarries. There are some of us who consider handling slate, in however limited a capacity, to be man's work.'

This last remark was directed at Murdo Campbell who was known to employ children to load slate on to the boats, and had already put a number of unskilled workers out of a job. No child under the age of thirteen had been employed in the Eisdalsa quarries since William's arrival, a quarter of a century earlier.

The Minister felt it was time for him to restore consensus.

'I am sure that none of us here would wish to deprive the children of their right to education,' he said in a conciliatory manner. 'Perhaps we can ask all employers here present to look into the age of their younger employees, and also to ask their neighbours to give careful consideration to this point. If the children cannot find work, they will stay in school.'

There was a general murmur of agreement and Elizabeth bowed to their noisy assurances that they would look into the matter, knowing that they would go away from the meeting and put it right out of their minds!

'Dr Beaton, you have an additional item to raise, I believe?' William invited David to take the floor.

'Thank you, Mr Chairman,' he began. 'This is by way of an interim announcement of a survey that I have been conducting into the way in which the schools of the parish may be used to monitor the health and welfare of its inhabitants.'

Some gentlemen appeared a little restive; the meeting had been going on for some time and they were looking forward

to accepting Alexander Lugas's invitation to take supper with him at the close.

David, aware that his audience was less than attentive, decided that shock tactics were what was required.

'Last week,' he announced, 'a child nearly died of lockjaw as a result of an infected wound. Only the intervention of his teacher, who observed his distressed condition and took the appropriate action, saved his life.'

He had their attention now right enough.

'Come, Beaton,' Murdo Campbell intervened, 'don't tell me you consider that the schools are responsible for the health of the children as well as their education!'

'No,' replied David, 'but I am saying that the school is the best place for responsible members of the community to use to monitor the health of the younger generation. It might also be argued that warning signs noted in the schoolroom could lead to the discovery of even greater problems in the home.'

William felt that David was getting bogged down in this discussion and sought to clarify his intention.

'I believe that you have a proposal, Dr Beaton? Would you care to outline it for the meeting?'

'I am drawing up a paper to be put before the County Council,' David announced, 'suggesting the official medical inspection of all schoolchildren on a regular basis. The purposes of this inspection would be threefold.

'To monitor the physical development of individuals from when they start school at five years, until they leave at the age of thirteen.

'To ensure the rapid diagnosis and treatment of acute conditions, to prevent spread of infection and to allay the effects of any condition which might otherwise go unnoticed until too late.

'To provide a means by which abused children may receive succour and their abusers be brought to justice.

'It is my intention, lady and gentlemen, to produce a report to this effect, which I intend to submit to the Authority,

provided of course that the completed document has the approval and the backing of this Board.'

In the general hubbub which followed David's speech, William's gavel could be heard as he called the meeting to order.

'As I understand it, Dr Beaton,' the chairman stated, when calm was restored, 'you are asking the School Board to give approval for your investigation to go ahead, and you will submit your report to the Board before passing it to the Education Department.'

'That is so,' David agreed.

'Does anyone have anything to say against the doctor's proposal?' William asked.

'Such a system would cost money,' Sir Henry Munro commented. 'Who do you suppose would pay for this, Dr Beaton?'

'I think that is a matter for the Authority, Sir Henry. No doubt, if they see the logic of averting a spate of preventable ill health, rather than footing the bill for costly medical treatment after the occurrence of disease, they will be prepared to finance the system out of public funds.'

Munro appeared satisfied. No one else ventured any opinion; most were too keen to get away to the promised supper at the Castle.

'Very well,' said William, 'if no one has anything to say against your proposal, Dr Beaton, I think you can assume the members will be happy to consider your report at the next meeting, by which time, I deduce, your researches will be completed?'

'I shall endeavour to have the draft report in your hands before then, Mr Chairman,' David assured him.

'Lady and gentlemen, there being no further matters to discuss, I declare the meeting closed.' With a flourish, William struck the gavel on the desk for the last time.

Alexander Lugas, who as secretary was obliged to make notes of everything said at these meetings, continued to scribble for a few moments longer while the remaining members gathered their belongings together and filed out of the hall.

Soon the Drill Hall, used frequently these days for such meetings, was empty except for William, David and Elizabeth.

'Are you sure you would not rather have gone to this shindig at the Castle, Elizabeth?' William enquired.

'Two hours of those people is about all I can stand at any one time,' she laughed, gathering together her own papers.

'You must come back with me to Tigh na Broch, both of you,' David insisted. 'Annabel will be expecting us.'

'Are you sure?' Elizabeth asked anxiously. 'It is very late for entertaining.'

'Nonsense,' David asserted. 'She will be most distressed if you refuse. I was specifically instructed to invite you.'

'Oh, very well,' Elizabeth conceded, pleased to learn that Annabel was so obviously back to her normal routine.

When they arrived at the house, David was surprised to find that Annabel was already entertaining a guest.

Michael Brown rose to his feet as they came into the withdrawing-room.

'Michael!' cried David. 'Good heavens, man, this is a surprise! What brings you here at this time of night?'

'My apologies for what seems to be a double intrusion,' Michael began, colouring with embarrassment. 'Mrs Beaton did not mention that she was expecting other guests tonight.'

'Possibly because Mrs Beaton was not informed about them either!' Annabel observed archly. Then, seeing the apprehensive look on Elizabeth's face, she laughed. 'That is not quite true, Elizabeth. I did say that if you were not too long at the meeting, David might care to invite you and William back for supper.'

William and Elizabeth exchanged greetings with Michael, while Annabel went off to the kitchen to give instructions for the meal to be served.

'It will be just a cold collation, I'm afraid,' she apologised, rejoining her guests. 'Not knowing what time to expect you, nor how many you would be, I could hardly expect Daisy to have a hot meal in readiness.'

'This is really very kind,' Elizabeth assured her. 'I was expecting to have to forage for myself. My girl has had to go home for a few days, to care for her sister and her new baby.'

'An unexpected pleasure,' William joined in with his own reassurances, and Annabel basked in the warmth of their pleasantries.

'Now, Michael,' David insisted, 'you must tell us what brings you away from your duties at Dalmally.'

'I have come to thank you, Dr Beaton, for your assistance in getting me my new appointment,' Michael explained. 'I have been in Oban these past two days, attending interviews and seeing over the new hospital.'

'They have had the good sense to appoint you then?' David cried. 'My dear fellow, I could not be more delighted.'

'Please, David,' interrupted Annabel, 'the rest of us have no idea what you are both talking about!'

'I have been appointed Consultant Surgeon of the new hospital in Oban, Mrs Beaton,' Michael explained. 'Dr Beaton was kind enough to write me such a splendid recommendation that, as the Chairman of the Board indicated, it was impossible to turn me down!'

'Oh, David,' Annabel remonstrated with him. 'You are a close one. You never told me that Michael was planning to come back to the coast to work.'

'There was no point in raising Margaret's hopes,' David replied, 'until I knew for sure that Michael would be appointed.'

'Margaret's hopes?' Annabel regarded him quizzically, but her query was lost amid the excited congratulations of all the company.

'I am here with the children,' Michael explained. 'My sister is taking care of them while I sort out the business of finding a suitable house near the hospital. I believe I have found the very place, on Pulpit Hill, overlooking the Sound of Kerrera.'

'That sounds delightful,' exclaimed Elizabeth. 'I am sure that your father will be pleased to have you nearer home. I

know how much he enjoys the company of the children.'

'They must be nearly grown up by now,' observed Annabel. 'When we saw them, the little boy was three years old, which makes him – what? – thirteen or so?'

'Yes,' Michael agreed. 'James is preparing for medical training when he is seventeen. In fact, Dr Beaton, I had intended to ask if you would consider taking him as an apprentice yourself? He could have no better start than that.'

Before David could make any reply, Elizabeth enquired: 'And the little girl? Heather, I think you called her?'

'Heather is just eleven, and quite a handful. A very independent young miss,' Michael complained, but the tenderness which accompanied mention of his daughter was plain for all to see.

The meal was a jovial affair and it took the sound of the grandfather clock in the hall striking eleven to remind them that there was work to do, the next day.

In the general bustle of departure, Michael found David at his elbow.

'I like the idea of your boy joining me here,' he said. 'Wait behind if you will, Michael, and perhaps we can talk about it further.'

Elizabeth and William departed amid a deal of friendly banter. Annabel, realising that the men had business to discuss, excused herself and went upstairs, leaving David and Michael alone in the comfort of the living-room.

'I hope you did not mind my bringing up the question of James's apprenticeship,' Michael began. 'I realise that it is only a short time since Ian was similarly employed. Perhaps the presence of another young boy will be too much for you both to bear?'

'Nonsense,' David responded. 'I shall be delighted to take your lad. It will be just like old times! There is one thing, though. Provided Annabel agrees, I would like him to live here with us. It would be inconvenient if he were to reside on the island with his grandfather. Sometimes we work quite late, you know, and of course your own home in Oban would be

out of the question. Do you think he would agree to that?'

'I see nothing against it,' Michael replied. 'He will have much more facility for study here. My father's cottage is very small, there would be nowhere for him to work there.'

'Then we are agreed,' said David. 'Always assuming that Mrs Beaton is agreeable to the arrangement. Perhaps you will bring the boy to see us tomorrow, before you leave, and we can make a final decision.'

'There is another matter which I had hoped to discuss.' Michael sounded hesitant.

David suspected that he knew what the subject was, and waited patiently.

'I had hoped to find Miss Margaret here this evening, and was disappointed to discover that she is away from home. I hope this does not mean that your brother has made less than a complete recovery?'

'Oh, Angus is well enough,' David assured him. 'He simply used his convalescence as a ploy to get Margaret to spend some time with him on Mull. They have a great deal in common, you know . . . writing and such.'

'Yes, Miss Margaret did tell me of her aspiration to become a published author. I think it absolutely splendid. You must be very proud of her.' Michael's challenge startled David. Proud of her writing? Well, yes, he supposed it was something to be pleased about. Quite obviously Michael was very impressed by it.

'Dr Beaton,' Michael continued, more hesitant than ever, 'you know my age. I am seventeen years older than your daughter, and have a ready-made family. I have, however, formed a very great attachment for Miss Margaret, and do not think I flatter myself when I say that I believe my feelings may be reciprocated. I would take it kindly, sir, if you would allow me to address my attentions to your daughter, with the intention of asking her to become my wife.'

'As you say, Michael, you are considerably older than Margaret,' David replied. 'Although I have never considered a difference in ages to be any great barrier to a happy union.

For my own part, I can think of no one more suitable to whom I would wish to give my daughter. What her mother will think of your petition, however, I cannot say. I promise you this. Tomorrow you shall have an answer to both your requests. How will that suit you?'

'I could hope for nothing more, Dr Beaton,' Michael thanked him.

David took another small glass of whisky after he let Michael out. He wandered around the room, examining familiar objects until he came upon a family photograph standing on a side table. He picked it up and studied it for a long time.

He and Annabel sat either side of Morag on the garden seat, with the big bay window of the drawing-room behind them. Hugh and Stuart stood behind, smart in their Norfolk jackets and knickerbockers. Margaret, her arms around her little brother, sat at their feet on the old footstool from the study. They were all laughing except Ian, who gazed into the camera, a faraway look in his eyes. Was he wondering, even then, how long it would last?

The boys were all gone now. Hugh and Stuart would come back from time to time, no doubt, but never to stay. They had their own lives to lead. That was as it should be. But now Margaret? Could he bear to lose her also?

Replacing the photograph, David turned down the lights and went to talk to Annabel.

'That is the position, Mr Whylie. I am offering permanent employment to two skilled masons, and can offer three months work to six labourers. Do you think you can possibly help me out?'

Archie McLean tapped out his meerschaum pipe, scratched around in the bowl and tapped again.

Wordlessly, William leaned forward, offering his own tobacco jar.

'Thank you, no.' The younger man felt in his pockets and brought out a large leather pouch. 'Let me offer you some of mine. It's African. They grow it in Southern Rhodesia, you

know. There is a very distinct flavour, quite splendid, once you have accustomed yourself to it.'

William did indeed help himself. Holding the pouch, he remarked upon the softness of the leather.

'Okapi,' Archie explained, 'like a small giraffe . . . from the Central Belt.'

'Your casual references to all these amazing places that you have visited make me wonder why I have wasted my days languishing here,' William observed, not without some veracity.

'Someone has to stay behind to look after things at home,' Archie observed. 'Although it must be said that I met more of my fellow countrymen on my travels than any other race, apart from the indigenous peoples, of course.'

'What of the future? Will you settle here for good, do you think?' William was sorting through a pile of ledgers on his desk, while speaking.

'I have made sufficient of a fortune to be able to forget about working for a living,' Archie reminded him, 'but I do not intend to be idle. My heart is set upon this garden project. I have seen such wonders in Africa, and off the Mediterranean coast of Spain, that I feel there must be even more fabulous floral treasures to be sought further afield.

'Once I have the bones of my garden completed, I shall be off again, in search of the exotic plants of the Far East.'

'You must have something in common with our island schoolteacher then,' William observed innocently. 'Miss Logie is an expert upon the subject of our local flora. She gave an excellent discourse upon the topic last winter to the Technical and Scientific Institute. She is a very gifted artist, you know. Her flower paintings are quite exquisite.'

Archie's attention was arrested by this information, and his interest was not entirely botanical.

'She is still painting, then,' he murmured softly. As though to himself, he continued, 'She was always so much better at drawing than the rest of us, when we were in school together.'

'You must ask her to show you her work,' William urged. 'Perhaps she will wish to paint some of your unusual species.'

William was surprised at the enthusiasm which his suggestion evoked.

'Of course!' Archie exclaimed. 'Why did I not think of that? What a splendid fellow you are Whylie, to be sure.'

He would have grabbed his hat and set off in pursuit of the schoolmistress immediately had it not been for William's restraining words.

'You wanted names of suitable workmen. These are all good fellows, unemployed in the quarries through no fault of their own. These four are masons,' he indicated the names at the top of the list, 'the rest are able-bodied labourers capable of shifting several tons of rock a day. I am sure they would give you good service. All are family men, with responsibilities here in the village. I am beginning to persuade the younger, unattached quarrymen to seek work abroad. There is little hope for employment here for very much longer.'

'I am much obliged to you, Whylie.' Archie stood up to go. 'May I take it that you have no objection to my speaking to these people directly?'

'None whatever,' William assured him. 'Mind you, I cannot guarantee that they will be willing to come and work landscaping a garden. Such things are quite outside their experience.'

'Lifting and carrying rock is much the same, whether in a quarry or a park,' laughed Archie. 'And I should know, for I have done plenty in both situations!'

William had heard how McLean, stripped to the waist, was to be seen with crowbar and pick, shifting boulders and levelling hummocks on his ground, shoulder to shoulder with his men.

Those who take up his offer of work will not regret it, William told himself as he watched the tall, bronzed figure marching purposefully towards the schoolhouse on the far side of the harbour.

* * *

The house occupied by the schoolteacher on Eisdalsa Island had been little more than a bothy when Elizabeth had first arrived, twenty or more years previously. With William Whylie's assistance, she had made it into a very comfortable home, with every modern convenience that a single person could hope for. The living-room with its small scullery to one side was large and airy. A fine modern range provided not only heating and cooking facilities but also a constant supply of hot water to the sink. Few houses boasted such amenities in 1899. The bedroom was large enough to take a chest of drawers and a clothes press, as well as a bed. And best of all, a proper bathroom, with a real bath and water closet, had been included in this extension to the original single-roomed building.

Katherine threw her satchel of books on to the ottoman and picked up the kettle to fill it at the tap. She stoked the fire, burnt low during the day, and coaxed it into life.

With a sigh, she sat down in the one comfortable armchair, and slipped her aching feet out of the boots which had been cramping her all day.

Oh, what a relief. When the water boiled, maybe she would soak her feet. That was the only way to ease them!

Katherine loved her job. The children were a constant delight to her, and she gained great satisfaction from seeing each step they took, no matter how tiny, upon the route to knowledge and understanding, but she did get very tired. It was standing up all the time that was the cause, she felt sure. No matter how she tried, she could not manage to remain seated for more than a few moments in every hour. She wondered sometimes at the image she retained of the former schoolmaster of the Eisdalsa school, which she herself had attended. Mr Ogilvie never moved out of his chair, save to take prayers at the beginning and ending of each day. He had sat there on his perch, like an eagle in its eyrie, ever watchful, ever ready to lash out with his tongue, ever poised, taws in hand, to strike a blow for discipline – but she did not remember him other than seated in his chair.

Children ran his errands, not always associated with their schooling. One particular boy she recalled as sadly put upon. He filled ink-wells, polished desks and burned rubbish at the back of the building while the rest of them played in the yard. It had never occurred to her to wonder why this particular child was picked upon so. Perhaps he was retarded, more likely he was just poor and underfed. Many of them were in those days.

Her mind turned to the Downie family. How quickly David Beaton had moved to get them assistance once the facts were known. The father, Charles Downie, finding himself unemployed in the quarries, had gone south, seeking work. His wife, a simple woman with very little initiative, had given up trying to support her family, and the only money coming in to the household had been that earned by the eldest boy, barely thirteen years of age. Katherine shuddered to think what would have happened to Wee Rabbie had she not intervened and summoned the doctor. Now, because of their discussion that day, Dr Beaton was talking about a regular medical inspection of the children, and had asked her to help him carry this out. Mrs McIntyre was also involved, of course, but Katherine was very flattered to be consulted herself, and had even offered to act as the recorder for the project.

The kettle began to sing.

As though on cue, Archie McLean rapped on her door.

Forgetting she was without shoes, she went to answer the knock and stepped back in surprise when she recognised her caller.

'Mr McLean?' she greeted him uncertainly.

'Forgive this intrusion, Miss Logie.' Archie doffed his cap. How enchanting she was, he thought, flushed from the fire, a trifle dishevelled after a day in the school; she seemed shorter than he remembered her. Then he noticed that she was wearing nothing but stockings on her feet, and smiled. Poor girl, she must be embarrassed to be so caught unawares.

'I should have given notice of my intention to call, Miss Logie,' he tried to pretend not to notice the stockinged feet,

'but the truth is that before talking with Mr Whylie this afternoon I had no idea that I should require to enlist your services. Then, having realised how urgently I needed to see you, I decided to come since I was already on the island. I do hope you don't mind?'

'Please come in.' She held the door wider. 'Mind your head, the lintel is very low.'

Just in time, he ducked then straightened up, hesitating while his eyes adjusted to the darkening room.

'I had better light the lamp,' she said, gesturing towards the little table in the recess which had once held a bed.

'Let me,' he insisted, drawing out his own matches.

'Will you take tea?' she invited, as he trimmed the wick and replaced the glass globe on the oil lamp.

'That is very kind, thank you.'

At her direction, Archie went to seat himself beside the fire. Noticing a set of three paintings, framed and arranged above the fireplace, he regarded them closely.

'These are remarkably fine paintings,' he remarked. 'Are they your own work?'

The drawings were, indeed, extremely well executed. Archie was very impressed.

'This gorse is particularly lifelike,' he declared. 'It was one of the plants I missed the most in Africa, for you must know the old saying?' He smiled as he accepted his tea. '"When the gorse is not in bloom, kissing's out of season!"'

For a moment they sipped in silence. He was wondering if his joke had offended her, while she, discomfited by his presence, was partly flattered by his obvious wish to please her, and partly annoyed at his presumption that she would welcome him in. She was still not wholly convinced of his innocence in the matter of Johnstone's croft.

'You had some urgent matter to discuss with me?' she prompted, not wishing to prolong his stay.

'Yes, indeed.' He hesitated. Would she see through his subterfuge? 'I have a commission for a good artist, a painter of flowers. It was Mr Whylie who suggested your name.'

'What kind of a commission?' Despite her resolution, Katherine could not suppress her interest.

'The garden which I am creating at Johnstones is to be a kind of living museum. I want to produce a haven for plants from all around the globe, to grow them in a way which will enable those who cannot travel abroad, as I have been privileged to do, to enjoy the sight of these exotic blooms in a natural habitat. Apart from growing the plants, I also need to keep a written record of what is planted, and this will require detailed illustration, not only of the blooms themselves but of all parts of the plant. I notice that you are at pains to represent foliage, and even root systems in your drawings. This is exactly what is necessary for my purposes.'

When William had first given him the idea, Archie's intention had been merely to use her painting as a ploy, to encourage Katherine to visit his new home. Now he had seen the work of which she was capable, his enthusiasm for the project was growing by the minute.

'My painting is just a hobby,' she protested. 'Something which I do to occupy what little spare time I may have. I do not believe that I could undertake a task of the proportions you suggest, much as it would interest me.'

'Will you not come to the house at least, and see some of the material I have growing already in the greenhouses? Many species have yet to be obtained. Those to be grown outside must wait until the landscaping is completed, which might be another two years at least. So you see, we are talking of a very long-term project indeed.'

'I would certainly like to see your new house, Mr McLean,' she said. 'There has been so much talk about it in the village.'

'Then you will come?' he pleaded. 'When would you be free to make a visit? Saturday perhaps?'

She was overwhelmed by his persistence.

'Really, Mr McLean,' she laughed, 'you must not press me so.' She collected the cups and placed them on the table. Then, turning to face him so that the light from the fire illuminated her smiling face, she relented.

'Oh, very well,' she agreed. 'I will come next Saturday. Should I bring my sketch-book, do you suppose?'

'That is entirely up to you,' he replied. 'I shall want to show you around the parkland, providing the weather is fine, but if you come early in the day, there will be time for sketching, I feel sure.'

'Then you may send for me at ten o'clock,' she replied, taking the initiative.

'My driver will be waiting for you on the pier,' he promised.

He took the hand she proffered and bowed over it.

'Good day, Mr McLean,' she said.

He gave her a searching look.

'There was a time, when we were children, that you called me Archie,' he murmured.

'Until Saturday then, Archie.'

'Until Saturday, Katherine.'

PART VI

Chapter 1

Margaret viewed herself full-length in her mother's cheval mirror, and was pleased that she had decided upon a white dress after all.

The old Queen had been dead for more than a year, and the convivial court of Edward VII had long discarded the mourning clothes which had so stifled women's natural love of colour for half a century. Gone too was the notion that a wedding dress should be chosen with additional uses in mind.

Uncharacteristically, David had made no protest when Annabel had told him she was taking Margaret to Glasgow to buy her trousseau. He had given her carte blanche to spend what she must, and Annabel had taken him at his word.

Margaret's tastes in dress were simple. She had always veered more towards the practical than the fashionable, and even now was reluctant to spend money on clothes she might never wear again. If her father could afford such finery for her wedding, she wondered why had he not found the money to send her to school? It was all she had ever really wanted.

Annabel, whose own nuptials had been a very quiet affair, undertaken with the minimum of publicity, was determined that her daughter should be wed in proper style.

As always, Margaret had bowed to her mother's wishes, and what she saw reflected in the mirror certainly did not displease her.

The dress of white brocade fitted tightly at the waist and flared out into a full skirt which was drawn back into a softly flowing train, long enough to be recognised as such but sufficiently modest to be controlled by the bride herself

– a feature of particular importance in the climatic conditions experienced on Seileach in November.

The tight-fitting bodice had a heart-shaped neckline which exposed enough creamy skin at neck and shoulders to set off to advantage her grandmother's three-string pearl necklace.

Her fair hair had been brushed until it shone like gold in the weak November sunshine. It had been swept up at the back so that the curls sat on top of her head, and perched upon them was a delicate white dove constructed of tulle and velvet.

'Pass me the veil, Heather, if you please.' Margaret held out her hand to the girl who hovered at her elbow, entranced by the spectacle of this wonderful being who was soon to become her very own mama.

'Oh, Miss Margaret, you look so beautiful.' The child clapped her hands in glee. 'Wait till Papa sees you. He will fall in love with you all over again!'

Margaret placed the fine lace over her head and held still while Annabel arranged it so that it only partially obscured her face. She had to be able to see where she was going.

'Now, Heather.' Annabel lifted the pale blue dress from its hanger and carefully slipped it on over the dark curls. Michael's daughter, relishing the novel experience of dressing with grown-up ladies, stood patiently while Annabel fastened endless rows of tiny buttons.

The bridesmaid's gown was similarly styled to the bride's, but without the train and with tiny puffed sleeves replacing the long, tapered ones worn by Margaret. The girl made a perfect foil for her stepmother-to-be.

Annabel stepped back and viewed the pair.

'That is all, I think,' she said approvingly, drawing on her own elbow-length kid gloves. 'Now, Heather, take your cape and put it carefully over your shoulders, so as not to ruffle your hair . . . good.

'We must be off, Margaret, the carriage is waiting at the door. I will tell Papa to give you a few minutes, then you must follow us. The bride is allowed to be a little late, but do not try poor Michael's patience too much.'

She kissed her daughter, and their eyes met in understanding.

There was no question of Margaret Beaton going to her marriage in ignorance, as had been the case for the young women of earlier generations.

Margaret had never been shielded from anatomical information. Surrounded as she was by doctors and aspiring doctors, she could hardly fail to see and hear matters which might be taboo to other young females of her age.

Annabel had seen to it that her daughter would not make the mistakes which she herself had made by enlightening her about the mysteries of sex as soon as she was old enough to understand.

Even so, in these last few moments of solitude, Margaret had to admit to herself a certain fear of the unknown. She was not afraid of Michael. Dear Michael, whose love for her was so transparent. No, her fear was of herself. Would she come up to his expectations? He had been married before. Would he compare her with that other wife, and find her wanting?

It had been Michael who had, at first, made all the running. He had seemed to Margaret a very likeable older person, in a category equating to her uncle or even her father. Their friendship had deepened, and in response to his kindness and understanding of her grief, she began to consider him in a more romantic light. Fearing that he would view her feelings for him as girlish infatuation, she had kept them to herself until the day of Michael's visit to Mull, while Uncle Angus was still convalescing.

'Miss Margaret, a Dr Brown has called to see Dr Beaton. Shall I show him in here?' Mrs NcNab, her uncle's housekeeper, was clearly put out by this unwarranted intrusion. Everyone knew that her master was never to be disturbed until after midday when he was working on one of his books.

'Oh . . . yes, Mrs McNab.' Margaret, taken by surprise found herself inexplicably disturbed by the announcement.

She had greatly appreciated the care and consideration that

the young doctor had given to her Uncle Angus after the crash. She had also enjoyed the attention he had paid to herself. They had dined together on most days of that week at Dalmally. Since she or her father had been obliged to remain at Angus's bedside all that time, her meals had either to be taken alone or in Michael's company. Somehow, he had always contrived to be there just at the appropriate moment to take her to dine.

She had put his interest down to a concern for her father, who had been his mentor in earlier days, and perhaps also to a certain loneliness on his own part. He must be starved of adult company without a wife, and with two young children as his only companions.

Nevertheless, when the time came for them to part, she had felt a strong sense of loss. Although at first she tried to tell herself that her feelings towards him were merely admiration for his work, she had to admit to missing him during those interminable weeks at Tigh na Broch, while they were all seeking a return to normality. At times she had even dared to dream of life as a doctor's wife. Was she not admirably fitted for it?

There was little chance for her to consider how she should react to his present visit. The door swung back on its hinges, and Mrs McNab announced grandly, 'Dr Brown, ma'am,' and closed the door soundlessly behind him.

'Miss Margaret!' He came forward to take her hand, restraining himself from pulling her into his arms and kissing her, there and then.

'I fear my uncle has given strict instructions that he shall not be disturbed until midday, Dr Brown,' she told him hesitantly, sensing something of the tide of emotion which her visitor had brought into the room with him.

'So I understand from the housekeeper, Miss Beaton.'

There was an awkward pause.

'Your uncle is fully recovered now, I trust?' he asked solicitously. 'Your father felt that there might be a lingering congestion in the lungs.'

'He is well enough,' she replied, thankful for a topic upon which they could discourse without the intervention of these

difficult personal feelings. 'Although he does retain a somewhat troublesome cough,' she added. 'I suspect that that is as much due to his irrepressible habit of smoking a pipe as to his accident.'

'I am sure you are right, Miss Margaret.' He laughed, releasing some of the tension.

'You mentioned my papa,' she said. 'Have you seen him lately?'

'It was from him that I learnt of your visit to Mull,' he explained. 'I wished to convey a rather special piece of news to you myself. When I arrived at Tigh na Broch, it was to find you away from home.'

'What could you possibly have to tell me?' she asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

'I wished you to be the first to hear of my appointment as consultant surgeon at the new West Highland Hospital in Oban, Miss Margaret.'

'Why, that is splendid news,' she exclaimed, genuinely delighted by his success. 'Congratulations. I am sure Papa was very pleased with the progress of his former pupil.'

'He was instrumental in securing me the post,' Michael told her. 'He understood how desperate was my need to remove from my practice in Dalmally as soon as possible.'

'I do not understand, Dr Brown,' she responded. 'I thought you well content with your practice in Dalmally?'

'Oh, yes, I was.'

'Then why . . . ?' Margaret wondered why he seemed so reluctant to explain himself.

'Because I thought you would refuse me if I asked you to live so close to Ben Cruachan.'

He noticed that she had turned very pale. Had his presumption proved too much of a shock for her?

'But I don't understand?' she said, bewildered. 'Why should you ask me to live in Dalmally? Unless . . . oh . . . Dr Brown . . .'

Could it be true? Were her most cherished hopes to be fulfilled after all?

'It was really rather fortuitous that I saw your father in your absence,' he continued, 'because it gave me a chance to seek his permission to address you.'

'Address me?' she asked, hardly believing that this was happening.

'Upon a matter close to my heart, Miss Margaret.'

'And what was my papa's response to your request?' she asked anxiously.

'He gave me his permission.'

Her sigh of relief was quite audible. 'Then you have my permission also.' She smiled warmly.

'Miss Margaret . . . Margaret.' He took both her hands in his. 'I am a great deal older than you. Seventeen years.'

She nodded in understanding. She had feared that this great difference in their ages would be an insurmountable barrier to obtaining her parents' consent.

'And I would be bringing to our union a ready-made family,' he continued. 'Although I know that James and Heather will come to love you as I do,' he assured her, hastily.

She could contain her impatience no longer. 'Are you asking me to be your wife, Michael?' she prompted.

'Nothing would give me greater happiness than that you should consent to become Mrs Brown.'

Desperate now to throw herself into his arms, and tell him how much she loved him, Margaret nevertheless held back. There was one final hurdle to be negotiated.

'You must know,' she told him, 'that I am unlikely to be a very compliant wife. I have been brought up to think independently. Were women to be given the opportunity, I would certainly vote for a parliamentary candidate of my own choosing.' She was smiling mischievously now, and he knew she was teasing him.

'There is one matter upon which I am most adamant,' she continued more seriously. 'I have every intention of going on writing, and I hope one day to become a professional journalist.'

'Have no fear that I would try to stop you pursuing your

own interests,' he assured her. 'I shall be your first paying customer when your books begin to flow off the presses!'

Then to her surprise, he knelt down before her and put her left hand to his lips. He kissed it, and a thrilling tingle swept up her arm and down her spine. Involuntarily she gasped in delight.

'Miss Beaton,' he asked solemnly, 'will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?'

The words left her lips as though of their own volition.

'Oh, Michael . . . yes! Oh, yes, of course!'

He gathered her in his arms and held her close. He bent and kissed her: her hair, her eyes, the tip of her nose, then full upon the lips.

Angus chose that moment to fling open the door, and stride into the room, his arm outstretched.

'Dr Brown, this is a pleasant surprise!' His reading glasses were perched precariously on the end of his nose so that he could peer over them to avoid obstacles.

'Why, bless my soul, what's this?' He was suddenly aware that he was intruding upon an intimate moment.

'Er . . . sorry. Shall I go out again?' he asked, his eyes twinkling with merriment.

'Uncle Angus, Michael has asked me to marry him,' Margaret announced. 'And I have said yes!'

'Of course you have, my dear.' He nodded wisely. 'A very sensible decision, if I may say so. Congratulations to you both.'

Dear Uncle Angus, how good he had been to them both, making it so easy for them to meet discreetly during the long mourning period which followed Ian's death.

They had decided to wait until Margaret's twenty-first birthday to be married. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that Margaret had decided they must wait.

On reaching her majority, she would come into her inheritance. It was only a small amount of money, she believed, but it promised her the kind of independence that she needed to

pursue her own career without becoming a drain upon her future husband's limited resources.

The eighteen months of courtship had not been wasted. In that time, Margaret had completed a book of Highland folk tales, a collection of stories which she had been gathering from the old people of the district for as long as she could remember.

The stories had been told to her in Gaelic. Translating them into English, in an acceptable style, was a formidable task. Only yesterday the first volumes had arrived from the printers.

One copy, suitably inscribed, she had reserved for Michael as a very special wedding present. Another, addressed to Angus Beaton, lay even now upon her dressing table.

At the sound of the door opening, Margaret turned to greet her father.

David gasped with sheer astonishment. Like most fathers he was profoundly affected by the sight of his daughter in her bridal finery.

Could this lovely, mysterious stranger be the same grubby child he had so often scolded for shouting outside the surgery window, whose skinned knees he had bathed, whose tears of frustration he had kissed away when things did not go right for her? He thought of the days and weeks when he had been too busy to attend to her need for someone to take an interest in what she was doing, for help in her numerous childish projects. Where had the time gone? How he wished he could have it back, to use more wisely . . .

'Will I do, Papa?' she asked anxiously.

'You are beautiful,' he told her, choking back the tears which seemed to come so much more readily these days. 'Michael is a very fortunate man.'

'And I am very lucky too, Papa,' she said, throwing her arms about him. 'So many handsome gentlemen to see me wed.'

It was true, for Uncle Angus had come across for the occasion with William Whylie. Would he be wearing one of his delicious waistcoats? she wondered. Uncle William was

famous for his colourful waistcoats. Hugh and Stuart were here, and Hugh had brought a girl with him . . . very suitable, Mama had thought, a lawyer's daughter from Edinburgh. Stuart had no girl with him, but then there was always Wee Annie McGillivray. It was good of her to come when she was so busy though she would not agree to be a bridesmaid, of course. Margaret had only asked her because Mama had insisted. Wee Annie had laughed, as Margaret had known she would. White weddings and pretty bridesmaids were not to her taste at all. Rallies in the park, public meetings and distributing pamphlets were what she did best! But she was here anyway, and Aunt Anne would be pleased to see her, if only for a short while.

'Before we go . . .' David withdrew an important-looking envelope from his pocket. 'Today is the day for you to receive this. It is your grandmother's bequest to you.'

'What is it, the deeds of the house on Eisdalsa?'

Magaret had known since she was fifteen that the house, now occupied by Anne McGillivray, was her own property. The small rent which it attracted had been carefully salted away by her father, and had constituted part of her dowry which she knew had been discussed between him and Michael.

'There is something in addition,' David explained. 'Tuck it away somewhere safe and read it when you have more time to digest the contents.'

Margaret took the envelope, and placed it in the valise which stood open on the bed awaiting her final packing before Michael whisked her away on her honeymoon.

'We have all been so busy with the wedding that we have quite neglected this very special birthday,' David remarked, drawing another package from his pocket.

'Oh, Pa, what would Mama say if she could see you stuffing things in all your pockets that way!' Margaret chided, but could not disguise her curiosity as her father opened up the little velvet case and withdrew a small watch in delicately chased gold with decoration in blue enamel. It was designed to be worn on a fob, also in gold and shaped like a ribbon bow.

'It is exquisite, Papa. What a wonderful present. You have

been so good to me.' She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

With the precious watch pinned to her bodice, she took a final glance in the mirror and was ready.

Slowly and sedately, father and daughter descended the wide staircase together, crossed the hall where Daisy held open the wide front door, and were hustled into the waiting carriage by an impatient driver.

As the train pulled out of Queen's Street Station and crossed the points, Margaret was so jolted that the envelope nearly fell from her hand.

'You will strain your eyes if you try to read in this light,' Michael warned.

'But I must know what is in it,' she laughed happily. 'I would have read it last night but there was so much else to occupy me!' She looked up at him coyly, and was pleased to see him blush a little.

'Oh, very well,' he relented. 'But just the gist of it, mind. Legal writing is difficult to decipher at the best of times.'

Eagerly, Margaret scanned the pages, skipped a few, read a paragraph at the end, and then back-tracked a sentence or two. Wordlessly, she folded the document, and holding it loosely in her lap, gazed out of the window at the dark shadows closing in upon the November landscape.

Sensing that the contents of the document had in some way distressed her, Michael leaned towards her, placing a hand over hers.

'What is it, dearest?' he asked. 'Is it something that I should know about?'

She passed him the document, continuing to stare out into the gathering gloom.

He scanned the pages rapidly, then, reaching the final paragraph, looked up, puzzled.

'But this is wonderful news,' he declared. 'I would expect you to be dancing around the carriage with delight. Tell me, why so despondent?'

To his dismay, he found that his bride was weeping. Big round tears glistened in the corners of her eyes before rolling down her cheeks, dampening the delicate netting of her pretty veil.

'What . . . ?' He brushed away one of the tears, drew her to him and kissed her gently upon the lips.

'Tell me, my pet, why so sad?'

'So much money,' she whispered. 'I had no idea that Grandmama had left me so much money . . .'

'But surely that is cause for rejoicing?' he said, still mystified.

'You don't understand.' Margaret drew away from him, searching fruitlessly for a handkerchief.

Quickly he came to her rescue, producing a man-sized one of his own, with which he proceeded gently to dry her tears.

Taking it from him impatiently, she completed the task herself, blew her nose loudly, and adjusted her hat.

'The money was to have been used to send me to school,' she told him. 'See here.' She grabbed the paper back, and turned rapidly to a paragraph halfway through the document. 'It is quite clear that if Papa wished to obtain the money before my twenty-first birthday, specifically to pay school fees, he was at liberty to do so!'

'Perhaps your papa thought it undesirable for you to go away to school,' Michael tried to soothe her.

His words appeared to make her all the more unhappy.

'Papa knew very well how much I wanted to go to school, like Annie McGillivray!' she cried. 'He deliberately withheld this money, and let me think that he could not afford to send me. Grandmama knew that I wanted a proper education. That is why she left all her money to me!'

Michael sat silent for a few moments. It hurt him to see her so distressed, but he felt that anything he said at this moment might simply make matters worse.

'Papa must hate me,' she murmured incredulously, 'to have denied me the one thing in the world which I really wanted.'

'Perhaps he was mistaken not to give you the opportunity

to decide for yourself,' Michael agreed, 'but it may be that he considered he was acting in your own best interests.'

'How can you say that?' she demanded.

'I think that perhaps he loves you, not too little, but too well,' Michael suggested thoughtfully. He remembered the look of loving pride on David Beaton's face when he had walked down the aisle with Margaret on his arm. This was not a man who could knowingly wound his daughter.

Conflicting emotions clouded her thoughts as Margaret allowed her husband to cuddle her close. While the train thundered through the night, she tried to see things through her father's eyes, as Michael had suggested. Her feeling of betrayal seemed to swamp all logical thoughts. Although she tried to remind herself that her happiness at being Michael's wife was paramount, the pain caused by the knowledge of her father's deception simply refused to go away.

'Hugh!' Dr Anthony Miles forced a passage towards him through the throng of people. He was looking somewhat perturbed. 'Sorry to disturb you . . .' He cast a worried glance at Millicent Menzies.

'What is it?' Hugh demanded, annoyed at the interruption. For the first time that evening he had managed to get Millicent to himself, and here was Tony, bursting in upon their conversation.

'There is a message from the Infirmary. It seems there has been a riot at some public meeting by St George's Cross. There are a great many casualties. The hospital is calling for assistance. Will you join me?'

'Let me finish what I was saying to Miss Menzies,' Hugh replied brusquely. 'Wait for me at the front door.'

He turned to his companion.

'Millicent,' he began awkwardly, 'I had hoped to address you upon a very important matter and this evening appeared to be the ideal time. I have approached your father for permission to speak with you . . . Oh, damn it, Millicent!' He could no longer ignore Anthony's impatient signals from the doorway.

'I'm afraid what I had to say must wait. May I call upon you tomorrow?'

Millicent, who had come to accept such interruptions with equanimity during the months since Dr Hugh Beaton had come into her life, smiled up at him.

'Please go along, Hugh,' she urged him. 'What difference will a few hours make to us? There may be lives to be saved.'

He gave her a quizzical look. She was always teasing him for taking his work too seriously. Was she mocking him, or did she really consider that a few broken heads amongst a rowdy and no doubt inebriated mob were more important than his proposal of marriage?

Her smile seemed to be sincere so he took her at her word.

'I will call upon you in the morning, Millicent. If your mother has no objection?' he added hurriedly.

'Mama will allow it,' she replied, and held out her elegantly gloved hand for him to kiss.

He took his leave of his hostess, and of Campbell Menzies, QC, Millicent's father. That gentleman, who had been composing the announcement of his daughter's engagement for much of the evening, was most disconcerted at Hugh's abrupt departure.

'Don't tell me the little vixen has refused you, young feller!' he exclaimed. 'If she has, she deserves to have her hide tanned.'

'Nothing like that, sir,' Hugh assured him. 'I was interrupted before I was able to put the question. My colleague and I are called to an emergency at the Infirmary.'

'Oh, I see.' The portly lawyer slapped Hugh on the back encouragingly. 'Well, the lass will have to learn where your priorities lie if she is going to marry a doctor, eh?' Laughing, he sent the young man on his way.

The waiting area of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary reminded Hugh of nothing so much as a railway station. This was hardly surprising since Buchanan Street Station and the Infirmary had been constructed within a decade of one another.

Hugh had often heard Uncle William talk of the gift of

slates from Eisdalsa which had been used to roof the main parts of the building. The Chairman of the Eisdalsa Company had received a knighthood in recognition of his generosity, but the men who had worked to provide the slates had been paid not one penny for their labours!

The great hall, with its domed glass roof, was a seething mass of humanity. There was a great deal of shouting going on, interspersed with the moans and screams of the injured, and the voices of hospital staff attempting to obtain some measure of order.

Hugh and his friend quickly shed their dress coats, and donned the white overalls which Sister McKinley handed them. She greeted their appearance with evident relief.

'Thank you so much for coming, Doctors. My nurses are working their way through the superficial wounds, but there are one or two major injuries which you should attend to.' She indicated a row of trolleys and hastily erected trestle-tables on which were stretched a number of casualties in various degrees of consciousness.

'Professor Talbot and Mr Wood are already at work in the cubicles,' she added, 'and every available doctor has been called.'

'What has been going on, Sister?' Hugh asked, buttoning up his overall.

'It is these Suffragettes.' The Sister indicated her disapproval. 'It seems that they were gathered at the Cross, holding a political rally, and some of the gentlemen took exception to what they were saying!'

'Gentlemen?' Hugh raised his eyebrows. 'From the high proportion of females injured, that is hardly the description I would use.'

'Such women get what they deserve,' sniffed Sister McKinley. 'Ladies would not participate in such an unruly exercise!'

Hugh was not prepared to argue the point with her now.

'All right, Tony,' he said. 'You take the fractured femur, and I will start with the cracked skull!'

For an hour or more the two young doctors laboured unceasingly. It seemed that no sooner had the backlog of casualties been cleared than the constables brought in another group, and the disturbances began again.

Yet another trolley was wheeled forward at Hugh's signal. Ignoring all but the casualty, a young woman with an angry gash across her forehead, the doctor set to work to repair the damage.

For a few moments he worked in silence, then, seeking information, addressed the person who had accompanied his patient.

'This wound was made some time ago,' he began. 'What has taken you so long to get here?' He looked up to find himself gazing into the face of Wee Annie McGillivray. Surprise at seeing her there turned to dismay when he observed her shocking appearance. Dirty and dishevelled, she looked positively ill.

'Annie? What on earth are you doing, getting mixed up with these people?'

'What do you mean, *these people*?' she retorted, her smile of recognition quickly changing to a look of defiance. 'They are my people, women like me, seeking the right to a normal human existence.'

'Suffragettes!' he scoffed, and would have laughed at her, had he not realised how distressed she was.

'Hey, you look awful. Have you been wounded as well?' All solicitude now, he left the girl on the trolley for a nurse to finish bandaging, and led Annie to a bench.

'You look all in, lassie,' he said more kindly. Then, over his shoulder, 'Nurse, sal volatile here, if you please!'

She took the unpleasant draught which he offered her, and in a few minutes the colour returned to her ashen face.

'Better?' he asked.

She nodded silently.

'Bit shocked, I expect,' he offered.

She nodded again. 'I'm sorry I shouted at you. You have been working so hard. I have been watching you all this time.'

Smiling he shrugged away the compliment.

'Your friend will be all right with a good night's rest. Would you like me to call a cab?'

He noticed the look of alarm which passed across her features. Without a word, he took a half-sovereign from his trouser pocket and pressed it into her hand.

'Oh, no . . . please . . . you mustn't,' she murmured.

'Nonsense,' he declared, 'what are friends for? Anyway, it's not for you, it's for her.' He glanced at the girl on the trolley. Her pale face was almost indistinguishable from the white bandages which swathed her head.

'Do you think you can manage to get her home by yourself?' he asked anxiously. 'I would come with you, only . . .' He glanced around him. It was obvious that there was still plenty of work for him here.

'Oh, I'll manage,' she told him. 'Thank you.'

She looked so pitiful he was tempted to put his arms around her, and hug her.

'You promised to give me an address when I told you I was working in Glasgow, but you never did.'

Annie had deliberately avoided Hugh's suggestion that they should meet when he moved to the city. Now she shrugged evasively.

'I think I should come and check on your friend in the morning,' he went on. Then, ripping a piece of paper from his report pad, he waited for her to tell him the address. Reluctantly, she gave it.

Together they helped Annie's wounded friend to her feet, and while Annie guided the woman towards the exit, Hugh went in search of a porter to call a cab.

When he got back to his post, the two young women were nowhere to be seen.

The sight of Wee Annie McGillivray, weak and despondent, had rekindled his boyhood infatuation for her.

It was a pity that she made herself look such a drab for she was still the most beautiful girl he had ever known. It was all part of this Women's Movement thing that she

had got herself mixed up in, he supposed, to make herself look as unattractive as possible.

What a waste of all that education, brawling in the streets over a hopeless cause. He wondered what the Eisdalsa ladies would have to say if they could see their little protégé now!

'Is Miss McGillivray at home?'

At first glance, the slightly built girl who had answered the door might be taken for a child of no more than fourteen years or so, but a closer inspection revealed a tightness about the eyes and a sharpness of expression which marked her down as considerably older.

'Who's asking?' she demanded, the harshness of her voice immediately dispelling any lingering suspicion of childish innocence.

'Dr Hugh Beaton,' he replied, half expecting her to slam the door shut in his face. 'I attended Miss McGillivray's friend last night . . . at the hospital. I came to ask after her condition this morning.'

'Oh, Ephie's all right,' said the girl decisively, and began to close the door.

'And what of Miss McGillivray?' Hugh demanded, while there was still time. 'Has she recovered from the shock she had?'

'Yes,' was the abrupt reply. The door closed with a decisive clunk.

Hugh stood staring at it for some minutes, perplexed as to what his next move should be.

He had tossed and turned all night, unable to get Annie's face out of his mind. He had thought himself quite cured of his youthful obsession with the girl. Yet try as he would to force her out of his thoughts during those long hours, she kept intruding. Incidents long past were recalled with all the clarity of yesterday, and when he conjured up her face, his yearning was sufficient to make him feel physically ill.

Not once during that long night had he been able to dismiss her in favour of poor Millicent. Try as he might to supplant

those raven locks and dark gypsy eyes, there she was, smiling or frowning, beckoning him on . . . to what end?

Unable to sleep he had risen early, dressed with extreme care, and come out on to the streets to seek the lodging whose address she had so reluctantly given him.

He still did not know if she was at home. He hammered on the door once more.

The sound seemed to echo through his head. It was some minutes before the door opened a crack, and a different face appeared from that of the elfin maiden.

'What?' The accent was pure Glaswegian of the lowest kind.

'Miss McGillivray, is she at home?' he pleaded.

'No,' was the answer.

'Then where?' he demanded, becoming exasperated by this laconic conversation.

'London . . . taking the train this morning.' The door slammed shut once more. This time, however, Hugh was galvanised into action.

There was only one London train each morning, leaving at ten o'clock. He had less than an hour to travel across the city.

At the end of the dingy street of tall tenement blocks in which Annie lived there was a main thoroughfare. He ran to the corner and hailed a cab.

The city was waking up now. Men and women crowded the sidewalks, pressing towards their places of employment, each bent upon arriving at the appointed hour, fearful that a minute past the time would mean instant dismissal. For every employed person in Glasgow these days, three others waited to take his or her place. Horse-drawn trams and steam-driven pantechnicons fought for position on the cobbled roadways, beside elegant phaetons and grubby tinker's carts.

Hugh's cab came to a halt at the junction of Argyle Street with Buchanan Street. A sea of traffic confronted them. There was nothing for it but for Hugh to go ahead on foot.

Alighting from the stationary cab, he tossed the driver a

shilling and hurried through the teeming mass of people towards the station.

Under the great glass dome of the main concourse, the belching chimneys of half a dozen locomotives filled the air with acrid, sulphurous smoke. The atmosphere was quite blue, the haze making it difficult to see the indicator board.

'The London train?' he yelled at a porter, trundling a trolley piled high with trunks and suitcases.

'Platform three,' came the reply. Hugh forced his way through the crush surrounding the barrier. He found a machine and purchased a platform ticket. Once through the gate he was suddenly free of the press of passengers and found himself able to run the length of the train unhampered.

About halfway along he found her. The familiar face was staring out anxiously; she looked so alone and vulnerable. She had not seen him pass by.

Rather than startle her by knocking on the window, Hugh boarded the train at the far end of the carriage and made his way back along the corridor to her compartment.

Fortunately she was alone. He pushed aside the door and stepped in, closing it behind him.

She looked up, startled to see him.

'Hugh, what are you doing here?'

'More to the point, what are you doing here?' he demanded.

'I am going to London to join Mrs Pankhurst,' she said proudly. 'My presence is requested at Headquarters.'

'But why? What are you running away from?' he persisted.

'I'm not running away from anything,' she retorted. 'I am doing what I have always been destined to do.'

'And what is that, pray?' He tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to disguise his scepticism.

'I shall fight alongside my sisters for the emancipation of our gender,' she declared.

'In London, women are chaining themselves to railings,' he protested. 'They are being arrested in the streets. Some are

even being sent to prison, Annie. What would it do to your mother, if you were sent to prison . . . have you thought of that?'

The memory of poor Ellen McDougal was never far from Annie's consciousness. Even now she shuddered at the spectacle of that poor creature in her bare cell, rocking, endlessly rocking, on an upright chair which creaked as she moved.

Annie had promised Katrina that she would visit her daughter, and she had kept her word, making her way to the prison every month while she was at school in Edinburgh.

When she had moved away, she had gone to the asylum to say her farewells. Ellen had not recognised her, and made no comment when she said she would not be able to come in the future. Annie was convinced that her visits had meant little to Ellen, but she had made a promise to Katrina, and she had kept her word.

What if she were sent to prison? Could she stand up to the rigorous regime endured by poor Ellen? She was oblivious to her situation. Annie would be only too aware of her surroundings. Stubbornly, she pushed all thought of incarceration out of her mind.

Hugh persisted in his argument.

'Don't do this, Annie. Come home with me,' he pleaded. 'There is more to life than carrying banners and shouting slogans in the streets.'

'What . . .' she began.

'Marry me, Annie. Let me take care of you.' His voice softened; he gazed at her lovingly. 'We could go back to Argyll if you like, or stay here, whatever you wish. Please, Annie, don't go away, not like this, not now that I have found you again.'

She regarded the stocky, red-headed Highlander with astonishment, unable to prevent herself from comparing him with his brother. Had it been Stuart Beaton pleading with her to stay, she might have considered the proposal. But it was not Stuart but Hugh who stood before her, his eyes full of dog-like devotion. She was appalled.

Her undisguised dismay at his suggestion was enough to convince Hugh that she did not love him.

To soften the blow, she said, 'I am committed to the cause, Hugh. I can't give up now.'

The locomotive sprang to life with a huge burst of steam, a shrill whistle indicated imminent departure, and a small forward movement sent all the carriages shunting against one another. Hugh knew that he must leave, unless he wanted to accompany Annie to London.

For one wild moment he considered doing just that, but common sense prevailed. He jumped down on to the platform as a group of travellers pushed past him to take their seats in the carriage.

'Promise me one thing,' he demanded.

She appeared to be listening.

'Promise me that if you are ever in trouble, you will send for me. Will you, Annie? Will you do that?'

She nodded.

The train began to move.

He raised his hand in farewell.

She waved in return.

The cab had carried him halfway along Sauchiehall Street before Hugh remembered his missed appointment with Millicent Menzies.

Chapter 2

David put down his pen at last, and read through the recommendations he had been making as to how the new school medical service should be implemented.

Annabel, carrying a tray, advanced from the gloom into the circle of light about his desk.

'David, it is well after midnight,' she admonished him. 'Surely it can wait until morning?'

He pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead, and rubbed his eyes.

'Just finished,' he declared, satisfied with the night's efforts. 'All ready for copying in a fair hand tomorrow.'

Annabel glanced at the thick pile of papers and sighed. Over the years it had come to be accepted that she was David's secretary. His own handwriting was so indecipherable that all his reports and official letters must be rewritten.

'That will take me some time,' she observed. 'I cannot guarantee to have it ready for the two o'clock boat.'

'Just do your best, my dear,' he pacified her, sipping at the steaming cup of tea which she had poured him.

For some years, Margaret had been David's scribe, and Annabel had been glad to hand the task over to her. Now Margaret performed these same duties for her own husband. Why was it, Annabel wondered, that physicians were quite unable to write legibly?

As the morning wore on, and the pile of papers grew beside her, Annabel became aware that the document she was copying might well be referring to David himself. There was something proprietorial in his tone, as though he saw himself in this new role of Schools Medical Officer, an innovation he

had long pressed the Medical Committee of the County Council to introduce. Were he to be appointed, what would become of the practice? This was no part-time appointment which he had outlined. There would be a great deal of travelling, and probably meetings with other officers of the County Council. What then of their life here at Tigh na Broch?

She heard the outer surgery door close. David must have returned from his morning visits.

The final paragraph completed, Annabel blotted the sheet carefully and laid it upon the pile. Thoughtfully, she gathered the papers together, making sure they were in order, and placed them ready for his signature.

'You will be pleased to hear that old Mrs McLaren survived the night, and will live to attend many more meetings of the Knitting Circle yet, my dear!' David burst into the study and threw his coat over the nearest chair. 'Finished already?' he enquired, pleased that she had been able to get his report done in time to catch the post.

'I think we should discuss it before the report is posted.' Annabel remained seated behind the desk, taking the commanding position in the somewhat cluttered room. David was obliged to take the single easy chair.

'I have only a few minutes to spare,' he told her. 'After luncheon, I shall go across to the quarry office for sick parade. I can call in at the shipping office on my way.'

It was good to get the weight off his feet for a few minutes. He eased himself back into the chair and relaxed, feeling for his pipe as he did so.

'The post of Schools Medical Officer,' Annabel began, ignoring his plea for brevity, 'will require the holder to travel a great deal.'

'In the first year at least, yes,' he replied. 'Most of his time will be taken up visiting every district to set up the arrangements, and to encourage the local people to participate.'

'What kind of person will be appointed?' Annabel asked him directly.

'It will need to be someone with the vision to see the

scheme through the tricky setting-up period. Someone totally dedicated to the idea, and willing to face up to opposition and apathy wherever it may occur . . .' He puffed, thoughtfully, on his pipe and allowed his thoughts to wander.

Annabel recognised that self-satisfied expression. He really did intend to take the post himself. She had known it from the first!

'Will you be invited to take the job?' she asked him.

'No question of it, my dear.' He brushed a few flakes of ash from his sleeve, tamped the tobacco more securely into the bowl of the pipe, and took another deep pull.

'And shall you accept?'

Completely relaxed, and at ease with his conscience, David was quite oblivious to the temperature of her tone which had dropped several degrees.

'Naturally,' he replied. 'Who would bring more dedication to the task than I who have planned it?'

'Where will you live whilst you are carrying out this function?' she enquired. He seemed not to notice the emphasis upon the word 'you'.

'We shall probably require to move to Dumbarton where the Health Board has its headquarters,' he responded. Then, noticing for the first time a certain antagonism in her attitude, he continued, 'You will find many diversions, so close to the city. I am sure that the change will do us both good.'

'And what of our home here? What of the practice? Have you already made arrangements for them as well?'

'As a matter of fact I have given thought to these things, yes.' His answer was tinged with sarcasm. He sensed that she was not in agreement with his plans. Defensively, he removed the pipe before continuing.

'I would have thought that you would be congratulating me. Not every medical practitioner is given the opportunity to take on a County role. It is only a step from there to becoming Chief Medical Officer for Argyll, you know! That is the most prestigious post for any doctor within Local Government.'

'That is what you want, is it?' she demanded. 'To be the most important doctor in Argyll?'

'Of course!' he cried. 'Why, think of your own position. You will receive invitations from all the County circle. I am looking forward to a very considerable change of lifestyle.'

'And the practice?' she enquired coldly. 'What of your work here?'

'I have given much thought to that,' he told her enthusiastically. 'Now that Hugh is a married man, I am certain he will be looking for a situation which will allow him a good income, and a house large enough to accommodate a growing family. What better than that he take over from me here? I am sure that Millicent will agree. She is always so happy to stay here, and most reluctant to leave at the end of their visits.'

'You have discussed this with Hugh already?' Annabel's colour had risen; she was feeling distinctly warm around the collar.

'Not in so many words,' he replied casually. 'But I know he would jump at the opportunity. Not many young men are offered such a chance, at so early a stage in their careers.'

'What this amounts to,' Annabel rose to stand in front of him, so that he was obliged to look up at her, 'is that you have decided both my future and your son's with no consideration whatsoever for any other plans which either of us might have been making. It does not occur to you, does it, that I may not wish to tear myself up by the roots and leave friends, family, this place that I have come to love over the years? And for what? The occasional soiree; weekly tea parties with the Chairman's wife; a ball now and then . . . do you consider these ample compensation for the loss of my dearest companions of many years? This is my home. Oh, not the house, Hugh can have Tigh na Broch if he wants it, but I shall not leave Eisdalsa. I shall go and live in Margaret's cottage if she will allow me, but I will not move to Dumbarton.'

David was on his feet now, also red in the face with anger.

'You are my wife, Annabel. You will do what I decide!'

'No, David, you have already forfeited the right to command my movements. I used to believe that because I owed you a debt of gratitude for making me your wife, I must go along with you in all things. But you have abused my trust. You deceived me for many years over the true nature of Ian's illness. You denied your daughter the one privilege she has ever asked of us, despite the fact that Morag had made provision for her schooling, and now you are determined to disrupt my entire life, for your own ambition. You talk of the wonderful new life we shall have, as though all I need is the companionship of idle gossips. What will I be doing in Dumbarton amongst complete strangers whilst you spend the best part of the year travelling? No, David, if you accept this post, which will undoubtedly be offered to you, you go to Dumbarton alone. No doubt you will find time to visit me, passing through on your journeys about the countryside. You will always be welcome but do not expect me to comply with your arrangements without full discussion of all the implications, and proper consideration of my own feelings in the matter.'

Speechless with rage, David walked over to the window and gazed out at the sea, beating wildly along the shore. Its ferocity matched his own mood and did nothing to calm him. He turned upon his wife abruptly.

'How dare you accuse me of thoughtlessness where your needs are concerned? Never, throughout our marriage, have I neglected to consider what is best for you and the children. I have worked as hard as any man to maintain this household in comfort. I have supported four children, and given each of them the best possible start in life. You accuse me of disguising the truth about Ian, but out of your own mouth you have admitted that, had you known the facts, you would have restricted his activities. That was precisely why I did not inform you. The boy had as full and happy a life as I could give him under the circumstances. The very manner by which he met his death is sufficient proof that I was right to treat him so!'

'And what of your daughter, what of Margaret?' she screamed at him.

'It was not necessary for her to go away to school. She is knowledgeable enough without being exposed to all the nonsense emanating from so-called institutions of learning for females. Would you have her brawling in the streets like the McGillivray girl? Do you want her chaining herself to the railings outside Parliament? Is that what you wished for our daughter?'

'Margaret is too intelligent to follow those wilder elements of the Suffragette Movement,' Annabel retorted. 'Do you understand your daughter so little that you will not trust her to use her own common sense?'

'Every decision I have made has been in her best interests. She has gone to her marriage with a comfortable income of her own. What more could any woman want? My mother did not understand what temptation she was putting before the child. I had to do what I thought best!'

'And what of me? Was there no advantage in seeking my opinion in the matter of my daughter's future? Was I so irresponsible that, like your own mother's, my wishes were to be ignored?'

'Your argument is quite illogical, woman.' He was exasperated and annoyed, and was also aware that time was passing. As if to confirm the fact, the steamer's siren broke the uncomfortable silence which had settled over the room.

David picked up the report and shuffled through the papers, checking certain salient points.

'If you go, David,' she said firmly, 'you go alone.'

His pen hovered over the last page for an instant. Without looking up, he signed the document with a defiant flourish, folded it, very deliberately, and stuffed it into his inside pocket. He grabbed his hat and coat and hurried out. There would be a certain delay in loading from the quay. With luck he could still catch the steamer before she left.

'Mary and I have considered the position from every angle,'

Dougal McGillivray assured his employer. 'Apart from that good order in '02, which was very nearly scotched by the idiocy of Murdo Campbell, there has been no real growth in the industry.'

At a time when every shipload of slate leaving Eisdalsa for Australia was crucial to the winning of a contract, Murdo, by refusing to recognise new legislation which decreed that the men be paid at eight-weekly intervals rather than twice yearly, had forced the men of Lunga to take industrial action. They had failed to comply with the terms of their contract, by refusing to load the slates on to the ocean-going vessels.

Murdo tried to recruit unemployed labourers to do the work, declaring that since the quarriers' contracts were null and void, they would receive no payment for the work already done. He had called out the police to protect his blacklegs from the angry quarriers.

Dougal McGillivray had gone along to the Volunteers' meeting the night before the loading was due to take place, and had started a discussion amongst the quarrymen about the legitimacy of their claim. A number of the potential blacklegs, who were also present, had joined in the debate.

William had given his young assistant permission to promise temporary work to the unemployed men involved, provided they did not do the loading for Murdo Campbell.

Next morning, protected by the Oban police, reinforced by men from Dalmally and Inverary, Murdo Campbell had gone down to the pier to oversee the loading.

Word of the previous evening's deliberations had spread quickly amongst the unemployed men, and not one of them attempted to break the picket line. After listening quietly to the quarrymen's spokesman for a few minutes, they had dispersed in an orderly fashion.

Murdo Campbell, totally defeated, had been obliged to dismiss the policemen, whose services had not been required, and had been forced to pay his quarrymen after all. The slate boats sailed on time.

'Malcolm Logie was in London recently, as you know,'

Dougal continued. 'He tells me that new housing estates all around the city are being roofed with Dutch tiles, bright reds and greens, any colour you want seemingly. Slate is definitely not in the minds of architects any longer. What is fashion in London today will be common in York in a year or two, and before you know it Glasgow's new satellite towns will be sporting red roofs from Renfrew to Prestwick!'

'I wish that I did not share your pessimistic view of the future, Dougal, but in all honesty, I have to agree with you.' William Whylie sighed heavily. He had known for longer than Dougal realised that this departure was inevitable.

'What of your mother, and Mary's father . . . have you told them, yet?'

'The Minister is resigned to the situation. I have asked him to accompany us, but he will have none of it. He feels that with so many young folks moving out, the old people will need a parish priest with whom they feel comfortable. He is determined to end his days here, on Eisdalsa.'

'And Anne?' William had always admired Dougal's mother. No stronger, more determined woman had ever crossed his path. Through the worst trials that life could offer, she had emerged undefeated.

'Ma is still thinking about it,' Dougal replied. 'She has no reason to remain here, with Annie away in London and unlikely ever to come home to live again. But then, at her age it would be a great wrench to leave behind the friendships of a lifetime. She has time enough to make up her mind. We shall not sail for Australia until the beginning of January.'

'It is a great challenge for you, Dougal, but I am sure that you will rise to it admirably. Where exactly is this place, Kalgoorlie? I have never heard of it before.'

'About three hundred and fifty miles to the north-east of the city of Perth, according to Malcolm Logie. It is through his connections with the new mining company that I have been invited to go there as assistant to the mine's manager. It seems that there was a plethora of small claims to begin with, as happened in California, but very soon a consortium purchased

the individual properties, to make one large company. I am told that a small township is growing up there. It should be very exciting for the whole family.'

'I wish that I were young enough to be coming with you,' William observed, and meant it. Rheumatism had taken a hold on him to such an extent that there were mornings when he had to be hauled from his bed by his housekeeper, so stiff did he become when sleeping.

'Dr Beaton assures me that I shall seize up completely if I do not stop working in these conditions. I am seriously thinking of giving up here, myself.'

It was true that William was not obliged to work outside in the wet, nor to spend all his time at the quarry bottom, up to his knees in cold water. He was not, however, a man to allow any of his employees to suffer conditions which he would not tolerate for himself. As a consequence he was often to be found in the worst of situations in the most appalling weather, shoulder to shoulder with the slate workers. Now, as David persisted in telling him, he was paying the price of his dedication to the job.

'I take it that Mary is happy to go along with your plans?' William hurriedly steered the conversation away from his own troubles.

'Of course,' Dougal insisted. 'I could not contemplate such a move without her consent. She is as excited at the prospect as I am myself. Already she has plans to set up a school in the township, for we hear that no provision has been made for the growing number of families moving into the area. The mine's manager has welcomed her offer, and she is busy collecting all manner of items to take with her to get the project started.'

Sadly, there was plenty of school equipment standing idle in Eisdalsa's disused schoolroom. The pupils had dwindled to such a small number that it was no longer possible to run a separate school on the island. Those children remaining were ferried across to Seileach each morning to attend Elizabeth's school. How fortuitous it had been that Katherine Logie

had married Archie McLean just when she did, and saved him the embarrassment of having to dismiss her.

'I will have a word with Mrs McIntyre,' William told Dougal. 'If she has no use for the books and equipment left in the island schoolroom, Mary shall take everything with her. I do not believe that the Eisdalsa Quarrying Company can find a better use for it than she can!'

'That is very generous, sir,' exclaimed Dougal. 'I shall tell her right away.'

'It will be a sad ending to the year,' mused William. 'So many familiar faces about to depart.'

'What will you do, sir, if the Company decides to close down the workings?' Dougal knew how much dedication had gone into William's management of the quarries.

'I shall go quietly into retirement, I suppose,' he replied.

He had thought about it more and more during these last months, as the autumnal gales and the chill mornings had once again begun to take their toll of his diminishing vigour. He was scarcely old at sixty-seven, but it was unlikely that any employer would be interested in him, with so many younger men of experience seeking work. He could not contemplate the Colonies at his time of life; that was for the fellows with families, who had the prospect of a full and happy life ahead of them, and someone to carry on after they were gone. A bachelor, like himself, could live comfortably enough on the little money he had laid aside for his old age. He would miss the good people of Eisdalsa but perhaps he would return to Cornwall. It would have to be somewhere within sight of the sea . . .

Elizabeth laid down the letter, and allowed her gaze to wander over the room until it came to rest on Gordon's portrait in its silver frame. The sepia colouring of the old photograph did not detract one iota from those laughing eyes which had gazed steadfastly back at her for all these long years.

'Well, my darling, what shall we do?' she asked him, as

though fully expecting a reply. 'It is a marvellous offer, and one which will never come my way again.'

She read the letter through once more. It was from her old teacher, Miss Murdoch:

. . . so you see, my dear Elizabeth, I am forced to give up at last.

I have followed your progress over the years, and not just from your own letters either.

You will recall that Mrs Ogilvie, whose husband was your late employer, was a cousin of mine. She, it appears, has maintained a friendship with one Mr Ford, until recently a school's inspector in your area . . .

Elizabeth smiled to herself, recalling the day when that same Mr Ford had proposed to her, and how put out he had been by her refusal.

Mr Ford kept her informed of all your doings for many years, and was always effusive in his praises.

It is because I feel that I would be handing over to someone of like mind, that I implore you to consider this proposition. The other partners have already agreed to accept my nomination for controlling shareholder and headteacher. My fifty-one percent share is valued at fifteen hundred pounds. I know it is a large sum, but I trust you will be able to afford it.

It would make me so happy to know that I was leaving the Solway Academy in your hands . . .

It was an opportunity of the kind one dreams of, offering the prospect of owning a stake in her old school, and of becoming its headmistress!

What would William do about a teacher for the Seileach school if she left? was her first thought. Then, with a rueful smile, she put aside all ideas of accepting the proposal because she did not have the money anyway.

Elizabeth had been very nearly destitute when she came to work at the school on Eisdalsa Island. Her salary as an assistant teacher had barely been sufficient to keep body and soul together. After her marriage to Gordon McIntyre, she had considered herself comfortably off by comparison, but in truth the couple had lived modestly in a house built upon land leased from the Marquis's estate. She had sold the house, and the remaining lease, to Morag Beaton when she herself had taken over the Seileach school on the death of Farquar Ogilvie. This small amount of capital, together with the little that she had been able to put by during the intervening years, amounted to no more than five hundred pounds. There was no possibility of her being able to raise the money needed for Miss Murdoch's proposition.

She addressed Gordon's photograph again.

'It wasn't all that difficult to decide after all, was it?'

Absently she polished the silver frame with her handkerchief, kissed the picture and replaced it on the piano.

A loud knocking on the outer door brought her instantly out of her reverie. Elizabeth went to open it and was pleasantly surprised to find a somewhat dishevelled William Whylie, shivering on the doorstep.

'What a day,' he declared, shaking the rain off his heavy tweed overcoat. 'One would think it was winter already!'

'You could not have come at a more propitious moment,' she declared. 'I will make us some tea, and then you may add the weight of your advice to my deliberations.'

She busied herself for a few moments with crockery and tea cakes, which she soon had her visitor toasting for her before the open grate. The comforting glow of the coals cheered the whole room.

'My, that was good,' William declared as he drained his cup and licked the last vestiges of buttery crumbs from the corner of his mouth.

'What are you doing out and about at this time of day?' she asked him at last. 'It cannot be good for you to get so wet and cold.'

'I had to call in on David at Tigh na Broch,' he explained. 'Since I was passing, I thought I might pay you a visit too.'

'You are not unwell, I hope?' she enquired solicitously.

'Eh? Oh, because I was visiting the good doctor? No, it's nothing like that. Actually we were discussing the problems arising from the lack of work in the quarries. It affects you too, I'm afraid. Three more families are moving out this week, and the McAllister brothers have just informed me that both of their families are emigrating to South America in the New Year.'

'I know about those going this week,' she told him, 'but with the McAllister children gone, that will leave me with less than twenty pupils on roll.' She could not disguise her dismay at his news.

'It will hardly be a challenge for one of your talents,' William observed, reading her thoughts. 'Particularly when it is the children with least potential who are likely to remain. I think it has to be accepted that the most articulate and skilled parents are the most likely to seek their opportunities elsewhere. It is their offspring who have been your shining lights in the past.'

There was no denying his logic. The village school had prepared more than its share of university graduates in the past decade, women as well as men, but they had been the children of the skilled artisans and the wealthier farmers, and those of the local professional men, lawyers, doctors and ministers of the church.

'All the more reason for smaller classes and a good teacher.' Elizabeth spoke without real conviction. The problem of the poorer families was that they could not afford to have their children permanently in school. Whenever the work of the village or of the croft demanded additional unskilled labour, the children would be absent from school. Only a spell of really bad weather ensured their attendance.

'It is a post more suited to a fledgling teacher, and you know it,' William protested. 'I feel ashamed to have to ask you to continue under such circumstances.'

'It is strange that this matter should be raised on the very day that I have received a wonderful offer of employment in a Ladies' College in the Borders,' Elizabeth told him, and explained the contents of Miss Murdoch's letter.

William, shocked by the prospect that Elizabeth might be considering leaving, was silent for a few moments. Then in a quiet voice filled with anxiety, he asked, 'Will you take up the offer?'

'How can I?' she demanded. 'I am barely able to lay hands upon five hundred pounds, let alone fifteen hundred.'

'If you had the money, would you go?'

She paused before answering, sensing that there was more in his question than a detached interest.

'I am not sure,' she answered honestly. 'A large part of myself is tied up in this place. The only real friends I have ever known are here. But then again, things are changing. Anne is talking about accompanying Dougal and Mary to Australia, even Annabel was hinting at some alteration to David's work which might necessitate their leaving Tigh na Broch. And you . . . what will you do if the quarries close for good?'

'I have no plans as yet,' he told her, his mind churning with thoughts he hardly dare utter. 'I had considered returning to Cornwall where the climate might improve my rheumatics, but, like yourself, I feel that the best part of my life has been lived here. There is really nothing to go home to.'

'What a poor old couple we are, to be sure.' She laughed, lightly. 'Our friends are all branching out in new directions while we cling to the past. Why do you suppose that they are more ready for change than us?'

'Perhaps it is because they have family to sustain them, someone else to consider, someone else to have ambitions for?' William was staring at her, willing her to understand his meaning.

Elizabeth looked up quickly. The intensity of his gaze almost frightened her. He leaned forward in his chair, his hands on the arms, his knuckles white with the ferocity of his grasp.

'I am not such a fool as to believe that I could ever take the place of Gordon McIntyre in your heart, Elizabeth,' he blurted out, 'but I do love you. I have always loved you . . . ever since the first day that we met, aboard the steamer.'

She made no response, but did not discourage him from continuing.

'When you chose Gordon all those years ago, I thought my heart would break. Then, realising that there was no point in moping, I determined to establish myself in the role of family friend. It was one which I was pleased to occupy, for it gave me access to your company, if not your heart.'

'Oh, William.' She choked back tears of regret.

'In proposing marriage now,' he continued, 'I want you to understand that such a union would be on terms of your choosing. I would not make any . . . demands . . . upon you that you did not wish to comply with, quite freely.

'I am seeking a comfortable existence and intellectual companionship for my declining years. You need financial backing and, dare I suggest, a little male support in a challenging future. Could you bring yourself to form a partnership with me, dear Elizabeth?'

It was the strangest proposal of marriage. Did he honestly believe that they could live under one roof, pursuing their separate interests, as though they were both still single?

'Do you really suppose, my dear,' she replied gently, 'that I am so bereft of normal human feelings and desires that I would consent to be your wife without inviting you into my bed?'

Somehow he found himself on his knees before her, her hands in his.

'What is it you are saying, Elizabeth?' he pleaded.

'What I am saying, William dear,' she replied, smiling with a radiance which quite took his breath away, 'is that I will happily marry you without any of those reservations which you have put so delicately.'

'You will?' He could not believe the evidence of his own ears. For all these years he had refrained from asking her, certain that she would never take another husband.

'Twenty years is a long enough period of mourning, don't you think?' Still smiling, she glanced across at the portrait in its silver frame. 'Gordon would have blessed our union, of that I am sure. He always had the highest regard for you.'

He kissed her hands, her wrists, her bared forearm.

She bent her head towards him. Suddenly his arms were about her, and his lips pressed firmly to hers. All the years of pent-up passion passed between them in that single kiss.

Suddenly, William released her. With an agonised cry he fell back upon the hearthrug, struggling to reach the calf of his leg which had gone into spasm.

'Ouch,' he cried, rubbing furiously. 'Cramp!'

Elizabeth eased him to his feet, supporting his weight until the muscles relaxed. Suddenly she began to laugh.

Instantly he joined her.

'What else can an old codger like me expect?' he exclaimed. 'Carrying on like a young lad!'

'What would an old woman like me want with a young lad anyway?' Elizabeth demanded.

He took her in his arms again.

'If you only knew how often I have dreamed of this moment,' he murmured, burying his face in her hair.

'You never spoke, William,' she said. 'Never gave the slightest indication . . .'

'I knew how much you loved Gordon,' he replied. 'It did not seem possible that you could have anything left for me.'

'It is possible to love more than one human being, believe me,' she insisted. 'I am sure that Gordon would have wanted this.'

He silenced her with another kiss, full upon her lips.

It was late when he finally left the house. Their plans had been made. They would marry quietly early in the New Year, and Elizabeth would write immediately accepting Miss Murdoch's offer. As a married woman she should have no difficulty in negotiating the purchase of shares in the school. They would call upon Katherine McLean to

take over the Seileach school until a permanent replacement could be found.

'Will you find someone to row you across at this hour?' she demanded anxiously. 'The sea is very rough.'

'If there is no one about, I shall bed down at the inn. Don't you worry about me,' he responded, gaily.

'Oh, but I shall,' she insisted. 'You are my responsibility now!'

She stood on the doorstep until his figure had disappeared into the gloom. Then, returning to her desk, she extracted a piece of writing paper and took up her pen.

Anne McGillivray made her way to the McDougal's croft, as she had done every Sunday afternoon since Katrina's death.

In her basket, she carried scones and bannocks, still hot from the griddle. Jack and his father had little time or inclination for baking, and with Martha living in as housekeeper at Johnstones they looked forward to Anne's Sunday teas with the greatest pleasure.

On this raw December day, Jack, who had been out to Eilean nam Uan to tend the sheep, was crouched over the fire, trying to get some circulation back into his frozen fingers. John had already laid a clean white cloth on the scrubbed table, and put out Katrina's treasured china. In a small vase of Waterford crystal he had placed a few sprigs of yellow gorse, still flowering in the depths of winter.

Everything was as his wife would have had it when there was 'company' coming.

The meal passed pleasantly enough. The friends exchanged little snippets of information gathered during the week. John asked after Wee Annie, for whom he'd had a great fondness since, as a young girl, she had shown such kindness to Katrina.

'She writes occasionally,' Anne answered his query. How could she tell him of her own fears for the child's safety? Her letters were full of meetings, outdoor rallies, marches, and clashes with the police. How long would it be before she herself was in trouble with the law?

'Och, she will soon tire of all that Suffragette nonsense,' scoffed Jack. 'She'll be back with her tail between her legs in no time at all . . . eh, Lass?' He gave his black and white collie a gentle push with his toe. The bitch stirred, then repositioned her long muzzle upon a pair of snowy white front paws, sighed deeply, and gave him a soulful stare.

'That's the only girl for me,' declared Jack, leaning down to tickle the collie behind her ears. Full of adoration for her master, she responded with a lick of the fingers.

'Och, you and your dog,' scoffed John McDougal. 'Some fine day a wee lassie will come prancing in through that door, and you will be head over heels for her. Just mark my words!'

Anne contemplated the farmer's son. Jack, at forty-six, seemed to her to be a confirmed bachelor. Had he, she wondered, ever been close enough to a girl to ask her to marry him? Anne thought not. It had been a heavy burden for a young boy to carry: a sister struck down by disease, rendered incapable of caring for herself, and prey to the first unscrupulous man who came along; a mother tormented by depression, pursued to the grave by the knowledge of her own guilt in her child's terrible experiences; and a father overwhelmed by the family's troubles, and unable to deal with them. Perhaps it had been as well that Jack McDougal had not had a wife or children to care for during those dreadful days.

Before the meal was over, the night began to close in and Jack rose apologetically.

'I must look in on the calves,' he told Anne. 'We had two born this week.'

He slipped out into the gathering dusk, leaving the older couple alone together.

'Dougal and Mary are going away in the New Year,' Anne announced, bluntly, hardly able to believe her own words. 'To Australia.'

John looked up, startled. His eyes searched her face for some indication of her feelings, but her expression was wooden.

'You will miss them,' he said, rather lamely.

'I might go with them, John.'

There, it was out. She had not meant it to sound like a threat but he interpreted it so.

'How can you go?' he demanded. Then, clutching at straws. 'What about Wee Annie?'

'Annie has no need of an aging mother, stuck out here in the back of beyond,' she responded. 'I could be of help to Dougal and Mary. At my age, such opportunities for adventure do not come often.'

'But what about me?' he asked, despairing of the prospect of empty years ahead, without her cheerful presence always somewhere near at hand.

'Why, John, would you miss me?' She looked into his eyes, willing him to speak the words she had waited so long to hear.

'Please, Anne, don't leave me alone. I don't think I could go on without you.'

'Come with us.' Her voice was soft, pleading like his own.

He started at her words. What did she mean? Go with them . . . how?

'Must I say it for you, you silly, darling man?' she cried. 'Marry me, and we can all go to Australia together. Jack too if he wants. There will be land aplenty to farm. It is great sheep country, I am told.'

'What's this?' Jack had returned from the byre. 'What is great sheep country?'

'Western Australia,' said his father, his gaze fixed upon Anne's face. 'Where your new stepmother and I are going to farm!'

He gathered Anne into his arms and held her as though he could never release her. She put up her face to be kissed, laughing and crying at the same time.

'Well,' remarked Jack, 'it has taken you both long enough.' Amused by their startled looks, he went on, 'Martha and I have been saying for years that the two of you should be wed.'

'Martha will not mind?' asked Anne anxiously. She had no wish to be the cause of a rift within this sorely tried family.

'She will be delighted, as I am,' Jack assured her. Then,

pushing his father aside, he kissed Anne. 'We shall be proud to have you as our mother,' he declared. 'Now, tell me, what's all this about Australia?'

Katherine wiped her brushes thoughtfully, studied the illustration she had just completed with a critical eye, then laid it carefully on the desk to dry.

The folio of water-colour paintings was growing quite bulky. She would soon have to begin separating the work into the various categories which Archie had suggested.

She wandered out into the great conservatory, which Mr Platt had designed to give a panoramic view down the valley and across the bay. Over by the loch the men were busy with Archie's latest venture, the reconstruction of a lake village of Stone Age times. He saw it as a historical exercise, designed to give people an insight into how their forebears had lived, but the local population considered the building to be a folly, and regarded their wealthy neighbour's peculiarity with amused tolerance.

Archie had fulfilled his promise to open the grounds of Johnstones to everyone in the locality. It might be many years before the beauty of the planting would be appreciated fully, but even now it was a pleasant place to walk on a summer evening, and in the past five years, the sweeping lawns had become the recognised site for the annual Highland Show.

Archie had made several difficult and sometimes dangerous expeditions abroad, to find rare and hitherto unknown plants. He brought many of them home for cultivation.

Recently, Katherine had joined him on these expeditions, painting the plants in their natural habitat. Her detailed drawings had brought acclaim from botanical circles both at home and abroad.

Archie had been fortunate enough to appoint Ian McDougal as his head gardener. At the time when Archie was seeking someone to create his new garden, Martha's son had just completed his apprenticeship at Ballachuan House. He was

an intelligent young man, and seemed equal to the challenge which Johnstones presented. The two men quickly developed a rapport which was to serve them, and the gardens, well for the next twenty years.

'I thought there might be a cup of tea, if I came in now.' Archie threw himself into a comfortable chair and picked up the painting Katherine had just completed.

'Mind,' she called out, 'don't smudge it. The paint is still wet.'

'Perfect,' he declared admiringly. 'I don't know how you make them look so lifelike.'

'We really must do something about acquiring more portfolios,' she told him. 'Perhaps we could make a trip to Edinburgh? I need other supplies as well.'

She pulled the bell-rope and came to sit beside him, taking the newly finished picture from him. His hands were not very clean, she noticed.

'You look tired,' she said, dusting a smudge of soil from one corner of the paper and replacing the painting on the table. 'I thought the men were paid to do the digging.'

'I can never forget I was once as strong as those lads down there. If I get my hands on a shovel, I'm away. It's only when I get this crick in my back that I remember those days are long past!'

At that moment, Martha McDougal brought in the tea tray and set it down between them.

'What's this I hear about your father and Jack making plans to go to Australia?' demanded Archie. 'All the men are talking about it.'

'Australia!' Katherine was quite taken aback.

'There's more,' announced Archie, pleased to be the bearer of news for once. Usually it was Katherine who brought back all the village gossip, from her frequent visits to Eisdalsa.

'You mean, about his getting married?' Martha asked.

'Married!' exclaimed Katherine. 'Don't tell me he has at last decided to make an honest woman of Anne McGillivray!'

Anne's Sunday visits to the McDougal croft had raised

eyebrows for the first few months after Katrina's death. When it became quite clear that there was nothing 'going on', the gossip quickly died, but within the community the relationship between these two lonely people had been the source of gentle banter and no little amusement for a number of years.

'It seems that Dougal McGillivray has been offered an appointment managing a gold mine in Western Australia. He and his family leave within the month. When Anne told my father she was to accompany them, he was forced to ask her to wed him, or watch her go out of his life forever.'

'Oh, how romantic,' cried Katherine. 'I am so happy for them both.' Then suddenly realising that there was another aspect to the event, she turned to Martha. 'But what about you and Ian? Will you not want to join your family in this great adventure?'

'Ian thinks in terms of decades, not months or even years like the rest of us,' laughed Archie. 'He will not leave here until those saplings down in the valley are mighty trees, believe me!'

Katherine sought a reply from Martha.

'While Ian needs me, I shall remain near at hand,' she said resignedly. Her illegitimate son had been the centre of her life from the day of his birth. She would never abandon him, no matter how strong the remainder of her family ties. 'Besides,' she continued, 'someone must stay at home for Ellen's sake. Maybe one day she will need me.'

'I cannot tell you how relieved I am to hear that you will not be going,' Katherine told her. 'I do not know what we would do without you.'

Martha had served in many households and understood what it was to be a servant. Here, however, she was regarded as a colleague and a friend.

'Have no fear, Mrs McLean,' she assured Katherine, 'I cannot foresee a time when I shall wish to exchange the Australian desert for Johnstones. I thought that I had reached the pinnacle of success when Dr Beaton appointed me as nurse to the isolation hospital, but I have never been so satisfied with

my situation as I am now. You will not be getting rid of me in a hurry!'

Archie laughed heartily as his housekeeper stalked out of the room.

'We were discussing your days as a navvy,' Katherine reminded her husband. 'You have never explained what happened between yourself and Murdo Campbell. When you left here in '76, you were the best of friends, but since you returned from Africa you have had nothing whatever to say to one another.'

'We were partners for a long time,' Archie replied. He thought for a moment, reluctant to disclose those feelings of rancour which had so blighted his memories of the diamond fields of the Transvaal.

No matter how hard he tried to disguise it, the anger remained. Katherine detected it, even though he spoke in measured tones, trying to give a fair account of what took place.

'We found diamonds, and established a claim which we owned jointly,' he began. 'For a while we worked in the blue clay and turned up some quite reasonable stones – enough for each of us to salt away a considerable nest egg. Then the clay ran out and for weeks we found nothing.

'At the end of what, for me, had been yet another fruitless day, Murdo came into the tent with a diamond of considerable size. About two hundred carats, I estimated. He said he had dug it up on the part of the claim he had been working all week. We were both delighted because it suggested that he had struck more diamond-bearing clay.

'We had a drink to celebrate, ate our evening meal and settled down for the night. Only then did he tell me that he had received a letter from you, indicating that you were not prepared to wait for him any longer.'

Katherine made to protest, but Archie silenced her with a movement of his hand.

'So that he could keep his promise to you, I agreed to buy out his half of the claim at an inflated price, because of the stone he had found that day. By rights, half the value of that

last diamond he had found was mine, but believing that you were going to benefit from his fortune, I foolishly gave him my half share in that stone as a wedding present.

'We both travelled down to the Cape and I waved him goodbye from the dock. He took with him that one diamond, together with his own savings and most of mine, which I had used to buy him out.

'On my way back to the mine, I met a trader with whom we had had dealings from time to time. He would take small stones in exchange for equipment and supplies. He was surprised to see me, because he had understood from Murdo that we were both going home. This was why, he told me, he had agreed to buy back our equipment for a single diamond of two hundred and twenty carats. He was about to go up to our claim to collect his belongings!'

'So Murdo did not find the diamond where he said he did?' It was a complicated story, but Katherine thought she understood.

'Precisely. I had given him about three times the value of the claim on the strength of that find, and now I was without either money or equipment. Murdo had sold it all.'

'Nevertheless, you came home with a fortune.' She was puzzled.

'The trader and I travelled back to the claim together,' Archie explained. 'There had been torrential rain in my absence, and the wall of the dig had collapsed at one side. I climbed down into the pit to try to shore up the wall, and picked up a stone twice the size of the one which Murdo had used to deceive me. Then I found another, and another.

'That landslip had opened a second pipe of blue clay bearing diamonds of very fine quality.

'I paid the trader off with one of the stones, engaged some additional labour, and went on working the site successfully for another six months. With the proceeds of the mine, I set sail for Australia and tried my hand at gold mining. Then, one day, when I was particularly sick for a sight of home, I decided to jack it all in. The rest you know.'

'Has Murdo never asked you how you came by a fortune after all?' she queried.

'It seems he lacks the courage to address me on the subject,' Archie replied. 'If he is wondering how I overcame his betrayal, he may go on wondering until the day he dies. Not only did he leave me nearly destitute, he had sailed home to marry the only girl in the world I had ever cared about. Can you imagine how I felt when I met you at that Hogmanay Ball, and found that you were not Mrs Murdo Campbell after all?'

He came and joined her on the sofa, putting his arms around her in a fond embrace.

'Oh, Katherine,' he murmured, 'I am the luckiest man alive!'

Annabel stood on the hilltop and watched the steamer preparing to leave.

On the deck she could make out the figures of William and Elizabeth. She raised a hand in salute. William lifted his hat and Elizabeth waved.

How happy they seemed, now that they had tied the knot at last. It had been a blow to learn that they would be departing for Dumfries so soon. Elizabeth was full of enthusiasm for her new post, excited at the prospect of becoming a part of the great educational revolution which she was convinced was about to take place. Even William was full of ideas for courses in astronomy and physics for the pupils, subjects which many girls' schools ignored.

It was an establishment of the highest repute. Elizabeth must be very proud to be its new headmistress. Heather Brown had already completed her schooling there, and she was going to Oxford in the autumn. No doubt Morag would prevail upon her father to send her there, now that Elizabeth was in charge. Millicent could hardly refuse her daughter in the circumstances.

Two more figures joined them on the deck. One was unmistakably her son Stuart, resplendent in the uniform of a surgeon lieutenant in the Royal Navy. What a shock

it had been when he had arrived with Hugh and Millicent, and announced that he had joined the Service . . . was it really only two weeks ago?

They should not have been surprised at his decision, for he had often talked of combining medicine and the sea. She wondered what HMS *Hampshire* was like. He had promised to give her a guided tour when next the ship docked in the Clyde.

Beside her son, she could distinguish David, muffled up against the biting January wind.

Her husband had been upset by Stuart's decision to go to sea. It was not what he would have wished for the boy. She smiled to herself. It was just another instance in which David had tried to arrange someone else's life. This time he had been unsuccessful because Stuart was too strong a personality to be dissuaded from anything he had set his heart upon.

Thankfully David had managed to put a brave face on matters. By the time they were ready to leave for Glasgow, he seemed to have come to terms with the situation and had even agreed to Stuart's taking away the old Celtic manuscript to work on while he was at sea.

The steamer gave a final whistle and the paddle wheels began to churn the waters of the Sound into a creamy wake. As she nosed out into the bay, steering towards that impossibly narrow strait between Seileach and Lunga, Annabel turned away.

The upheaval at Tigh na Broch had been sufficient to occupy the Beatons completely for the last few weeks. The full implication of the impending change had been quite obscured by the practicalities of vacating the family home.

Annabel, recalling her own early experiences as the doctor's wife, determined to allow her daughter-in-law free rein in the house. With Anne married, and living in the McDougals' cottage until their sailing date for Australia, Margaret's cottage on Eisdalsa had become vacant. Two days before Hugh was due to arrive with his family, Annabel moved into it.

Right up to the moment when their double bed was carried out of the front bedroom and transported to the ferry, David

had not really believed that she meant to stay behind on Eisdalsa.

'This is our new home,' she had announced, standing in the low-ceilinged cottage, surrounded by packing cases. 'This is where I intend to stay while you are gallivanting around the countryside.'

Noting the dismal expression on her husband's face she continued comfortingly. 'When you find that there is less necessity for travelling, perhaps we can find somewhere to reside permanently.'

Allowing no opportunity for her husband to comment, she continued, 'I would like it to be somewhere not too far away from the children, but convenient for travel around the county. Connel seems an ideal place. If you are agreeable, I shall start making enquiries about suitable properties in the spring.'

A small furnished apartment had been acquired in Dumbarton, convenient to the County Offices, where David could stay when working from headquarters. When his travels brought him back to the Oban area he would, of course, reside on the island.

When David was on the point of leaving for Dumbarton on the steamer, Annabel had suggested that, from time to time, she might join him at the flat so that she could do some shopping, meet a few old friends, and even go to a concert or two with him. She was glad to see how happy the suggestion made him.

The truth was that once he had considered his wife's arguments more calmly, David had been forced to concede that she was right. She would have been left very much on her own in the city. There was more to occupy her here, with Hugh and Millicent nearby and all the grandchildren. She would certainly not be lonely.

It had been a blow to Annabel to find that not only Anne McGillivray but also Elizabeth and William would soon be departing. Delighted as she was to see her two friends married, she had been very disappointed to learn of their plans to go south to the Borders.

They had promised to come and visit often . . . she would certainly hold them to that!

There was little likelihood that new faces would replace those departing. Now that William had retired from the scene, the Eisdalsa operation was closed down, and only Murdo Campbell's quarries still operated on the island of Lunga. As many men as possible would transfer there, of course, but many more would be forced to leave the district.

Soon the island would be altogether deserted, a few elderly people only remaining.

Annabel looked down into the great yawning holes in the ground, gouged out by nearly two centuries of digging and blasting. All around the world, she mused, there were people tucked up warm and dry under their roofs of Eisdalsa slate.

The island was strangely silent now that the pumps had ceased their incessant gyrations. It was the first time they had been still since the night of the storm. November 1881, she remembered, the night when Margaret and Wee Annie McGillivray had been born. The night when Gordon McIntyre drowned, and Jamie McGillivray was killed.

She shuddered, suddenly cold despite her warm wrappings.

There had been such good times, when Morag was still alive, and the house rang with the sound of children's voices. Dear Morag and little Ian . . . she brushed away a tear.

Well, there would be more good times in the future, now that she had settled her differences with David.

Careful to avoid the prickles, she stripped a few sprigs of gorse from a nearby bush. Even in the depths of winter there were always a few buds, ready to open in the warmth of her little cottage.

Soon it would be spring, and she would have the pleasure of showing Hugh's weans the haunts which her own children had so enjoyed.

Into her mind there crept a vision of her granddaughter, Morag, whose intense expression and clear grey eyes reminded one so much of David. What if she were to choose medicine as

a career? It was always possible now that women like Kirsty McGillivray had shown the way.

Annabel's thoughts strayed to her own daughter. Did Margaret still harbour a grudge against her father after all these years? It was difficult to tell when they were together. There was certainly less warmth in her attitude towards David, but Annabel supposed that her husband attributed this to his daughter's being a married woman. He probably accepted their estrangement as something which always happened when a daughter left home to be someone else's wife.

Annabel had never considered Margaret deprived as a result of her education in the village school. She had been well taught by Elizabeth . . . well enough to receive national acclaim as a writer, and well enough to make a good marriage.

How proud Michael had been as each new book was published. It was a pity that Margaret had, as yet, no children of her own, but Annabel had come to love Michael's pair as if they were her own grandchildren.

Morag's money had been used for schooling after all, for Margaret had insisted on paying for Heather to go to the Solway Academy, and was prepared to finance her University course as well.

Annabel turned slowly.

Across the bay, the tall chimneys of Tigh na Broch were pouring out their blue wood smoke. The sight gladdened her. The Beaton occupancy of the house was secure for another generation.

She shaded her eyes and scanned the waters to the south. The steamer was quite out of sight.

Shivering in the late-afternoon breeze, Annabel drew her coat more firmly around her, and picked her way down the stony path towards the shore.

MARY WITHALL

BEACON ON THE SHORE

To the small coastal community of Eisdalsa, in Argyle, come three new arrivals. David Beaton has relinquished a promising career in surgery in order to carry on his late father's rural practice, and brings with him innovations in medicine which are not always readily accepted by his patients. Cornish engineer William Whylie is determined to set the Eisdalsa slate quarries back on their feet after years of neglect. Both men are rivals for the attentions of Elizabeth Duncan, the new schoolteacher, who has decided views on the subject of women's emancipation, and will not have her future decided for her by any man.

Mary Withall's first novel is an evocative portrayal of the relationships, triumphs and tragedies of a small island community.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

ELIZABETH GILL

THE SINGING WINDS

Kate Farrer leaves London when her father dies in 1880 and travels north to County Durham to live with her uncle, a mine manager. Restricted by the rigid confines of polite society and hungry for education and honest company, she looks elsewhere for fulfilment and stimulation. This she finds – both by working in her uncle's office, unprecedented for a woman, and in the person of Jon Armstrong.

But Jon is a pit lad, tough and enigmatic, and not a man Kate should be consorting with. He's also engaged to a local lass, Lizzie Harton. And Kate's uncle has very different plans about who she should marry.

Then a sudden and shocking pit disaster destroys not only lives but Jon and Lizzie's future. Frustrated, both girls turn to other men for comfort until a second disaster threatens their carefully constructed worlds.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

ANNA JACOBS

SALEM STREET

In 1820 Salem Street is sparkling and new: eight small terraced houses built by a Lancashire mill owner for his best workers. Annie Gibson's family is one of the first to move in – a step up in the world for them. But when her mother dies, Annie's happy childhood ends and she is left to bring up her brother and sister.

Red-haired, intelligent and startlingly pretty, Annie soon finds herself banished from home by a jealous stepmother. She finds work in the local doctor's household where she learns about the fascinating world outside Salem Street. And when her adored childhood friend, Matt, asks her to marry him Annie thinks her dreams are coming true.

But suddenly everything turns upside-down. Abandoned and pregnant. Annie returns to Salem Street, where an unexpected offer gives her independence. One day, she vows, she will move into the wider world again. One day .

SALEM STREET is a heartwarming saga in the great tradition of Catherine Cookson and Josephine Cox.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

The end of the nineteenth century is approaching, bringing with it changes to the small, sheltered community of Eisdalsa in the Western Isles of Scotland.

Anne McGillivray and Elizabeth McIntyre are both widows, but play increasingly important roles in the community. David Beaton, in his capacity as doctor for the area, has much to contend with when a cholera epidemic sweeps through the islands. Suffering a loss in his own family and dealing with an increasingly difficult relationship with his daughter, David faces challenges both professional and personal.

Eventually the epidemic is over, and things begin to return to normal. Eisdalsa sees the return of familiar faces, bringing with them marriages, births and happiness for some, heartache and tragedy for others.

DON'T MISS MARY WITHALL'S FIRST EISDALSA NOVEL, *BEACON ON THE SHORE*, ALSO AVAILABLE FROM CORONET.

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